

The Living and the Dead: Funeral Work in New York City

Kristin Leavelle Murphy

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2018

©2018
Kristin Leavelle Murphy
All rights reserved

ABSTRACT

The Living and the Dead: Funeral Work in New York City

Kristin Leavelle Murphy

Status and stigma are fundamental to understanding the organization of social groups, including the forces that create and perpetuate inequality along multiple axes - race, ethnicity, and class, among others. One of the challenges in the discipline of sociology is that these deeply enmeshed processes are studied separately, rather than in relation to each other. This dissertation bridges the study of status and stigma through ethnographic examination of the affective, situational, and contextual interplay of status and stigma processes in urban spaces that are both exceptional and ubiquitous: the neighborhood funeral home. To study these processes, I observed and participated in the day-to-day activities of three New York City funeral homes over four years.

The project contributes to three areas: ethnographic design, the literature on status and stigma processes, and to urban and cultural sociology. Whereas most ethnographic projects focus on a single subject – a community, a workplace, a profession - in isolation or a multi-sited framework, this project has different approach. The three focal funeral homes were selected based on a process rather than a population – all are located in neighborhoods in the midst of dramatic demographic transitions. To better understand and contextualize these micro interactions, I collected data and participated in activities at other levels of the funeral industry: national, state, and local. I attended funeral directors trainings and conventions, including with the largest national association, the historically black funeral directors association, and New York State's convention. For other perspectives on New York City, I interviewed over forty funeral directors and allied professionals throughout the five boroughs.

This project strives to avoid static and categorical explanations for status and stigma processes, the binaries of black and white, elite and poor, and explores life both in the middle and at the intersection. Using this multi-site design, it contributes to the research on neighborhood change and demographic transition as I distinguish between experiences common to the general process of neighborhood change while isolating those that emerge from the variation in changes specific to particular processes. This project is not only one of the most in-depth studies of the funeral industry, it also more broadly contributes to our understanding of the dynamic relationship of status and stigma, and the process and business of the monetization of cultural practices.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE	33
CHAPTER TWO	64
CHAPTER THREE	108
CHAPTER FOUR	156
REFERENCES	197
APPENDIX	204

INTRODUCTION: Status *and* Stigma

Why status *and* stigma? Because they're studied separately but they're part of a same phenomenon. Sometimes status and stigma are recognized as related but distinct concepts. Other times they're conflated, used almost interchangeably. Most often, the terms are used loosely, without clear specification. I didn't set out to disentangle the concepts of status and stigma. I set out to learn about funeral directors. But trying to write about funeral directors-how they talk, how they operate in the world-brought me into what I hope will be a fruitful exploration of their interplay.¹

Why does this matter in terms of funeral directors? With respect to understanding their world, a lot of the questions that are interesting involve the relationships between funeral directors and outsiders. This ranged from perceptions of their work through outsiders' eyes, the impact of these perceptions on their own presentation, as individuals, and of their work-to who the outsiders are, and how that effects the work. These are the questions which motivated the original design of this project, which was to study city funeral homes in their neighborhoods-be it a neighborhood of insiders or outsiders.

The stigma side of funeral directing is more obvious, more frequently discussed. Most funeral directors mentioned it during the course of an interview. Stigma figures prominently in the popular media caricatures of funeral directors, not surprisingly. But where the stigma of funeral directing really comes through is in the academic literature. The seemingly obsessive, single minded focus of

¹ Here are the basic dimensions of the problem: 1. There is a lot of research on status. There is a lot of research on stigma. 2. They are related concepts. 3. The research rarely intersects-and when it does, it's from one 'side' and sloppy in reference to the other. 4. The work on status is deep and sprawling. The research on stigma tends to be more recent and narrowly focused. It is also more actively contested. (I'm not suggesting that status is 'settled,' but that stigma is particularly busy.) 5. Mostly the stigma people are busy in the labs-refining measures/ effects of stigma 6. There's a pretty wide gap between inside and outside the lab.

the stigmatization of funeral directing in academic literature confused me and pushed me back to the status of funeral directing.

The status side of funeral directing is more complicated. What we mean by and how we understand status is more nebulous, difficult to pin down, but always there. The sheer range of perceptions funeral directors had-embodied, performed, seemed to believe - about their own status in terms of their work, their role in a community, their importance or insignificance, their visibility or invisibility - would surprise someone who only read academic articles. Making sense of funeral directors requires making sense, somehow, of status and status claims, as distinct from stigma and stigmatizing projects.

Funeral directors are not a hidden population nor are they a neglected subject of academic research. They're part of the American imagination, entertainment, and popular media from major television series (*Six Feet Under*, *The Adams Family*) to graphic novels (*Fun Home*) to supporting roles in popular and academic literature. The roles, tropes, stereotypes, funeral directors play varies: there's the creepy guy, the power broker (i.e. - *Street Corner Society*), the slick suited money-maker. They've been called 'body delivery men' and "exploiters of human tragedy." Everyone has a story of a funeral home or a funeral director.

Funeral directors occupy a funny place - they are both ubiquitous and slightly mysterious; stigmatized by some, admired by others. They elicit a range of contradictory responses. Avery, a funeral director at the South Bronx field site, was asked to stop serving food at church events because it made people uncomfortable. On the other hand, she also said she was seen with respect because she wore a suit all the time. Many funeral directors say people refuse to shake their hands,

are uncomfortable with any physical contact (because they handle the dead). At the Canarsie, Brooklyn field site, Steve Sebbeto said a parent at his daughter's fancy private school asked him about waste management when he learned he was a funeral director. Why? Because there is a stereotype that funeral directing and waste management (in certain Brooklyn neighborhoods) are both "owned" by organized crime.

There are all sorts of strategies for studying status, different ways to operationalize it, to hone in on what we conceptually mean when we think about status. The key concept that organizes this work is social distance. And it necessarily follows that for there to be some kind of concept of distance, that some kind of measurement (whether imagined to be objective) or purely subjective underlies it. At the end of the day, I'll focus on observed behaviors, which one could imagine is the mechanism by which subjective measures are encoded into "objective" profiles.

Social distance as a sociological data point is not new. Variations and derivations of the original Bogardus scale - developed in the 1950s to study ethnic and racial tensions - have often been used in studies of occupational status. In addition to the subjective scale measures, sociologists have measured social distance as observed behavior-who do people actually interact with-a tradition going all the way back to W. Lloyd Warner's *Social Class in America* (Harvard, 1949)-'evaluated participation' and 'index of status characteristics.' But more recently, and explicitly, with respect to social distance, is Bearman on *Doormen* (Chicago, 2009).²

² For the record, occupational prestige has a long history in sociology as a composite of status, power, quality of work, education, and income (Treiman 1977). Prestige scores capture societal perceptions of the differential evaluations or rankings of occupations (Dunkerley 1975) and have been found to be highly reliable across respondents, locales, and time (Fossum & Moore, 1975; Sawinski & Domanski, 1991). Despite this, there is still an extended debate about 'what prestige scales actually measure.' (e.g. Grusky & Sorensen 1998; Grusky 1992; Goldthorpe and Hope 1972). Are they a measure of occupational desirability, prestige (in the sense of social honor), status, income? The least rabbit hole of the answers is: prestige scores capture

An idea put forward here is that social distance, which serves either as a type of self-protection or as a sign of respect-means that social distance could be used as a measure not only for status processes, but also for stigma processes. Others have worked in this vein as well; most compellingly is Lucas and Phelan (2012) whose lab based work considers the interweaving of status, stigma, and what will turn out to be critical for funeral directors, skill. In the case here, embalming skill is the most salient feature of the status/stigma interweaving process, since contact with the dead body is necessarily considered polluting.

One of the key issues in thinking about the relationship between status and stigma is that status is usually conceived of in terms of continuous scale (giving rise to the idea of distance as salient) whereas stigma is typically seen as binary (that is, one is stigmatized by some feature of their life or not). Weber, and those who have followed his lead by thinking about professionalization as a boundary defining process, suggests that status is “binarized” under some conditions. That these conditions frequently involve inducing distance from ritual pollution is not always noticed.

So, what is status? The answer obviously depends on the measures that are used to capture it. In this chapter I will focus on some of the research that engages with status, but not all. My interest is in thinking about how relational views of status, thought of in terms of social distance, lived out in explicit social behaviors with others, shape the world of the funeral director.

What is stigma? Erving Goffman traces it back to the Greeks. Social scientists start with Goffman.

A stigma, according to Goffman’s ‘now standard’ definition, is “evidence of an attribute that makes

multiple dimensions (power, influence, money, maybe even skill and social value). But part of the value is their remarkable consistency-even if we can’t exactly pinpoint which of these characteristics matters most.

him different from others in a category of persons” that he might otherwise belong to. This attribute can be some physical distinction, a character distinction, or a what Goffman calls a “tribal” marker (1963). “The distinction not only makes him different from others in the ‘usual’ category-but it puts him in a category “of a less desirable kind... he is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one” (1963:3). Stigmas are not things themselves; they do not exist outside of social relations. Goffman is clear that though we may talk about stigmas in terms of the "discrediting attributes" we should do so "in the language of relationships, not attributes...An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself” (1963:3).Goffman’s definition is expansive. He covers not only a wide range of stigmas from physical deformities to drug addiction or prostitution, but also their impact (inequality), and the importance of context-that stigmas vary by perspective and over time.

To study stigma, the most commonly used measure is social distance (Link et al. 1999, Pescosolido et al. 2010, Pescosolido and Martin 2015). This approach dates back to the 1950s, to Bogardus’s social distance scale. Originally designed to study ethnic and racial tensions, the scale measures people’s willingness or reluctance to interact with people from another group. They do this by asking people how comfortable they would be (or how much they would like/ dislike) to interact with types of people at different levels of social proximity-as a neighbor, friend, coworker, in-law, spouse, etc. In stigma research, participants are asked to do the same in terms of people with mental illnesses (or other stigmatizing attributes-criminal records, drug addiction, physical disabilities, HIV/ AIDS). The greater the social distance, the greater the stigma. Goffman develops this idea as well. A

classic stigma response, according to Goffman is social distance described as "avoidance rituals," "ceremonial avoidance, a self-protective kind."³

Even here one can see that stigma is confused, and it is confused with a lot of things, but it is particularly confused (and infused) with status. Status appears throughout this basic overview of stigma. While stigma researchers draw on Goffman's idea of social distance, "avoidance rituals" as self-protective disdain from the stigmatized or otherwise "contaminated" others, Goffman himself is careful to point out that social distance can signify either "self-protective concern" (as in the case of stigma) or "deferential restraint" (as in recognition of higher status). According to Goffman, while they may resemble each other, they are "analytically quite different"-and the oversight of this "constitutes a problem in the sociology of knowledge...In general, it would seem, one avoids a person of high status out of deference to him and avoids a person of lower status than one's own out of a self-protective concern" (1967:70). He even criticized researchers using social distance for

³ All of this seems so clear, but it is not. Still, my primary intention is not to contribute to (or further muddle) the debate about the stigma processes or concept confusion. I want to use the idea of stigma and its relationship to social distance, and the idea of status and its relationship to social distance to tell us something about funeral directors. Having said that, some review may be helpful. Despite the fact that stigma research is in a "period of resurgence," reviews all pinpoint a problem-there's confusion about the basic understanding of stigma (Pescosolido and Martin 2015, Livingston and Boyd 2010, Major & O'Brien 2005). These meta-analyses lament the "conceptual ambiguity," (Livingston and Boyd 2010), the "lack of clarity on the concept of stigma, and the "definitional morass" that has resulted from the "burgeoning research on stigma across fields topics and times" (Pescosolido and Martin 2015, 22.5). They laud the innovations in research - mostly lab experiments - new and exciting ways to measure stigma. But at the same time, they find that not everyone is on the same page about what stigma *actually is* -i.e.- what they are measuring so well. The problem is that stigma, as used in the research literature, is a hodgepodge, or as Link and Phelan call it, a "global referent category"(2001). Part of this hodgepodge and definitional morass comes from the fact that "terms and measures are often used interchangeably" (Pescosolido and Martin 22.1). Other things are called stigma, including "social distance, prejudice, exclusionary sentiments, negative affect, disclosure and dangerousness"(Pescosolido and Martin,2015 22.10). In terms of how this stigma confusion plays out (or has been worked around) in sociology: it's resulted in a segmentation of subjects and topics - research silos, to some extent - a problematic separation of the related conversations. While stigma research has mostly focused on mental illness, research on prejudice and discrimination "has targeted specific status characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, poverty, or sexual orientation" (Major and O'Brien 2005). This divide is less stark in interdisciplinary research and with sociology's greater "recognition" of other discipline's research "particularly psychological social psychology" (Link & Phelan 2001; Major & O'Brien 2005).

“overlook[ing]” the fact that individuals keep their distance from others either out of disdain (stigma) or respect (status recognition).⁴

Dirty Work

In analyzing and thinking about “stigma,” almost all researchers focus on the social response to people with mental illness. But stigma is a part of everyday life—as a topic of conversation, part of a particular experiences, generative of anxieties, and an element of projection, among other ways. A helpful lever is the idea of “dirty work.” Dirty work is a common expression, used broadly, exuberantly, colloquially to refer to undesirable activities, to work considered “beneath” someone, or to thankless, trivial, tedious, unnecessary or unsavory tasks. Among researchers, the term has a little more specificity. Everett C. Hughes used the term to characterize stigma in relation to occupations:

Every occupation is not one but several activities; some of them are the “dirty work” of that trade. It may be dirty in one of several ways. It may be simply physically disgusting. It may be a symbol of degradation, something that wounds one’s dignity. Finally, it may be dirty work in that it in some way goes counter to the more heroic of our moral conceptions. Dirty work of some kind is found in all occupations (1951:62).

Hughes later put it more succinctly: work can be dirty physically, socially, and/or morally (1958:122). A decade later, Goffman use these same three types in defining stigma. Others have built on this three-fold characterization. Most prominently, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) propose two criteria and common examples for each type. Physical dirty work involves the physical entities of actual dirt, bodily fluids and death as well as physical danger; examples of people in occupations that are physically dirty include sanitation workers, funeral directors, firefighters and soldiers. Social dirty work requires working with stigmatized populations or in positions of subordination; examples of

⁴ “Research on social distance scales has often most surprisingly overlooked the fact that an individual may keep his distance from others because they are too sacred for him, as well as because they are not sacred enough. The reason for this persistent error constitutes a problem in the sociology of knowledge”(Goffman 1967: 70).

people in occupations that are socially dirty include prison guards, social worker, chauffeurs and servants. And moral dirty work is work considered categorically immoral or that necessarily involves perceived deception or exploitation; examples of people in occupations that are morally dirty include prostitutes, pawnbrokers, used car salespeople or telemarketers. In addition to providing greater specificity for each type, Ashforth and Kreiner's work joins Hughes and Goffman's in understanding that dirty work and stigma are closely related.

That some work is "dirty" does not mean that work is unimportant or trivial. Dirty work is often an essential part of particular occupations, but the work is distasteful, contaminated in ways defined by the norms and customs of occupations and/or by relevant others. As each occupation operates in a society, dirty work occupations can be more generally useful. Despite the utility of such occupations, certain groups fill them, groups whose social status independent of occupation may not be high, thus distancing the rest of society from these necessary but unseemly tasks and from the people who do them (Hughes 1962). That is, though the work may be important in some social sense, it nevertheless pollutes—stigmatizes—those who do the work. Even as we acknowledge the utility of occupations heavily defined by dirty work, we "generally remain psychologically and behaviorally distanced from that work and those who do it, glad that it is someone else" (Ashforth & Kreiner 1999:416).

How does dirty work affect an occupation's status? An obvious answer—and the one generally found in the research—is that dirty work diminishes the status of an occupation, however occupational status is conceptualized and measured. What's common to these conceptualizations is that status is about social hierarchies—the ordering of roles, positions, individuals that structure relations among people and between people and organizations. That is, status is shaped by and

reflected in social interaction (Abbott 1981). Thus, if types of work are generally found disgusting and repulsive, and, on that basis, the work distances people in general from the work, that work and the people who do it are lower in a social hierarchy (Mills et al 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner 1999, etc). Thus, status reactions to dirty work are akin to stigmatizing reactions (just as status reactions to increasingly non-dirty work are akin to non-stigmatizing reactions).

Dirty jobs often are low status jobs. But this association—and the research agenda built on it—overlooks key parts of the conceptualization of dirty work. Most glaringly, it neglects the Hughes’s contention that, “dirty work of some kind is found in all occupations” (1951:62), and its corollary that “every occupation is several activities; some of them are the dirty work of that trade.” That is, dirty *work* does not mean dirty *job*. Nevertheless, research on dirty work is overwhelmingly about dirty jobs. Jobs that are commonly taken to be dirty, like garbage collecting, are convenient, easy to understand examples of dirty work as dirty job. But this conflation misses the dynamics of the relationship between stigma and status in occupations, fails to grasp broader implications of these dynamics, and, arguably, leads scholars to some dubious conclusions.

Ashforth and Kreiner, the most cited and prolific authors of “highly influential conceptual work” on dirty work (Simpson et al. 2012:11) briefly recognize that high prestige occupations can—and often do—involve dirty work. They focus, however, on low status occupations because, as they explain, “taint reduces prestige, prestige and dirty work are not independent, and most dirty work occupations have relatively low prestige” (1999:415). In the course of justifying their focus on low status occupations, they usefully theorize about the relationship how dirty work “works” in high status jobs. Take the example of lawyers, judges and doctors. These professions consistently rank among the most prestigious in the United States. Yet each involves dirty work. Working with

stigmatized populations, e.g., criminals and accused lawbreakers, lawyers and judges do socially dirty work. Contact with illness and the human body means doctors do physically dirty work. And if they treat a stigmatized condition or population, doctors additionally do socially dirty work. So how does this dirty work affect the status of these professions? Some argue that their status is diminished because “while these jobs are esteemed, they are tainted by virtue of their social associations with criminals and people with illnesses. Taint reduces the prestige of and stigmatizes these occupations” (Mills et al. 2007:5).

In other words, dirty work lowers the status of high status occupations, but the occupations still remain high status. Setting aside the important but unanswered questions of how do we know the status is diminished, e.g., based on a specified comparison, on crossing some threshold, or some other way, we can start with a question Ashforth and Kreiner do answer: “How does that work? That is, “Why would dirty work bring down the status of some occupations more than others?” Their answer is that dirty work has less negative impact on high status occupations because the status of these jobs is protected by a “status shield,” a concept they attribute to Arlie Hochschild. The status shield consists of the status, power, income and quality of work of an occupation. Taken together, these protect the status of an occupation from the status-damaging stigma of dirty work (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999:415). That is a particularly circular logic, but some aspects of the funeral director world will shed some light on the mechanisms here.

What’s missing is a deeper understanding that dirty work is more than simply stigma in the workplace, and looking beyond the stigmatizing, status-diminishing effects of dirty work. One of the things we see in this dissertation is that dirty work can be intimately and positively related to—even the source of—the very social and psychological elements that it is thought to harm: status, power,

and charisma. Dirt can elevate status. Dirt can be creative. The anthropological and sociological literature on a particular kind of occupation—the professions—shows this. The term itself, “dirty work,” is less common outside of management studies, one of the two research threads I developed above. But related concepts of purity, contamination, work, and status interest anthropologists and sociologists. It is here that we can find an alternative logic for thinking about the relationship between stigma and status in the workplace.

Although the management research literature on dirty work bases itself on the studies of the sociologist Everett C. Hughes, dirty work for Hughes is not only a status damaging stigma. Like management scholars, Hughes recognized dirty work has a different impact qua dirty work in different occupations. But unlike management scholars, he does not suggest dirty work has only one kind, a negative kind, of impact on status that varies only by degree and that is mediated by some kind of status shield. Rather, Hughes proposes a concept that is more dynamic: its impact, origin and mediating factors can be varied. For him, dirty work can indeed stigmatize, but it can also elevate status. In some cases, the dirty work contributes to the prestige of the occupation. Hughes offers the example of physicians for whom the “dirty work” (the handling of the human body) is an “intimate part of the very activity which gives the occupation its charisma” thereby contributing to the “prestigious role of the person who does the work”(1951: 64).

Hughes contrasts the status elevating physical dirty work of doctors to the stigmatizing physical dirty work of janitors. For a physician, the dirty part of her work is integral to the prestige and satisfaction of her job. For a janitor, it is not. What accounts for the difference? He offers two possible explanations. The first is satisfaction. The janitor, unlike the doctor, “does not integrate his dirty work into any deeply satisfying definition of his role.” The other is autonomy. People in certain

occupations have the dirty part of the work “willfully put upon [them]” and that dirty part may compose most of the occupation. Thus, occupations like janitor are stigmatized, and, thus, devalued, i.e., given lower status. For other occupations, like physicians, for example, this is not the case. Ultimately, Hughes offers multiple explanations for status. Autonomy is related to power and control, “satisfaction” suggests substantive differences. Hughes, in other words, is open to many of the most commonly cited explanations for status (others include income, education, power, client status).

Charisma and Order

In his example of the physician, Hughes invokes charisma to explain how dirty work relates to status. That is, in certain circumstances, dirty work is not stigmatizing, rather, it elevates status, the “dirty work is integrated into the whole” and contributes to the prestige of the work and the worker (1951). He suggests that charisma acts as a modifier of dirty work (transforming it from stigmatizing to status elevating), but doesn’t conceptualize charisma or specify exactly what role it plays. Further, he offers multiple other explanations for the status of occupations and, thus, opens an unhelpful floodgate for understanding how status and dirty work interact.

Edward Shils, on the other hand, methodically eliminates the multiple other, common explanations for status (e.g. income, education, power) and is singularly focused on charisma. For Shils, charisma is the critical basis for status. Charisma, therefore, is the key to understanding dirty work - and how our understanding of dirtiness elevates the ‘dirt’ of the physician while stigmatizing the dirt of a janitor. An occupation that consists of work that is physically dirty (in Hughes’ characterization) lacks status because it lacks charisma, specifically the charisma of skill, creativity and intellectuality. Using the same example as Hughes, janitors, Shills argues that they have low status because they

“handle only the detritus of man’s existence ... perform indispensable tasks [but] do not penetrate intellectually,” are “unskilled, uncreative”(1965:208). Physicians, on the other hand, have status because they provide order through skill, intellect, and in a critical arena of life.

The need for order relates status and charisma. Shils argues that “[t]he need for order and the fascination of disorder” are “unavoidable” features of society. Men (sic) need an order within which they can locate themselves, an order providing coherence, continuity and justice...” People often find this order in laws (religious, scientific, positive) or in whatever forces, powers and systems that “men (sic) perceive as ruling their lives.” Like anthropologist Mary Douglas, among others, Shils argues that because we seek order, there is power and potential—charisma—in disorder. As Douglas writes: “Though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognize that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolizes both danger and power”(Douglas 2003/1966:117).

Thus, charisma generates status because it possesses the power, or is perceived to possess the power, to create order from disorder. For Shils, charisma is most likely found in roles and institutions related to the “central values of society,” the powers and systems that men “perceive as ruling their lives” such as “scientific insight, theological reasoning, medical intervention, cognitive penetration into and control over nature”(1965:209). Individuals close to or participating in these central forces or power that rule men’s lives “become the objects of the attribution of charisma.” In other words, charisma is “the response to great ordering power” and someone who can create order “arouses charismatic responsiveness” (203) and thereby receives respect, achieves status.

The charismatic roles Shils identifies usually rely on intellect and esoteric knowledge. However, disorder and danger occur, even abound, in the natural and physical world and so individual physical safety and security are central societal values, i.e., the idea of a society, to say nothing of its actual existence, has to be grounded in some degree of physical safety and security. The physical can also be a basis for charisma. Some kinds of disorder are physical such that creating and maintaining order requires the kind of power that physicality generates. We see this, for example, in the charisma of “physical heroism which faces and overcomes danger on behalf of order” (207), i.e., on behalf of an ordering that societally important. By contrast, janitors and people in similar occupations certainly bring order to disorder, bring physical order to a physical disorder, but the order they bring is not central to the creation and maintenance of society and, thus, charisma is not attached to these occupations.

Unlike other sociologists writing on charisma and occupations, Shils allows for this possibility that charisma can generate status based on the physical. Although Abbott, for example, endorses Shils’s ordering argument, he not only fails to include physical charisma in his incredibly detailed and faithful rendering of Shils’s argument, but erases the possibility of such charisma by claiming Shils only endorses esoteric knowledge based charisma.

Like status, charisma is a dynamic, interpersonal recognition, created in interaction, evaluation, assessment, conditions, circumstances, context. Because it is dynamic, charisma allows for ambiguity and multiple perspectives as it can change over time and depending on circumstances. As a result, it may be too ambiguous and flexible a concept—as its mixed utility in the social science suggests. For instance, it’s “unclear” whether charisma “is an explanatory concept at all. It is a compelling

description of a recognizable phenomenon. But this is not the same as saying it explains the phenomenon” (Turner 2003:8).

Professions and Purity

Abbott argues (i.e., agrees with Shils) that occupations that generate order because of esoteric knowledge are the critical determinants of status: “the public” evaluates status based on “effective contact with disorder” (Abbott 1981). But this public valuation of order and disorder, of “charismatic dirty work” creates what he calls “the paradox of relative status within the professions.” The paradox is that the public and the professionals award status based on entirely different bases. The charismatic roles, activities, tasks that the public respects are “those least respected by professionals themselves.” While the public “confers status on effective contact with the disorderly,” these are “precisely the contacts which professionals want to escape” (1981:819). As professionals seek status within their profession, among their peers, they withdraw from front-line practice and delegate the charismatic ordering that is the source of public veneration.

Hughes points to the same paradox, the divergence of views from inside and outside of a professional occupation, in his example of the physician. While the physical dirty work of a physician gives the profession its charisma and, thus, status. At the same time, the “delegation of dirty work is part of the process of occupational mobility” within the profession (1951:64). Physicians may be thought charismatic from physical contact, but they elevate their occupational status by delegating more and more of the physical work to other physicians (e.g., interns) or medical care occupations (e.g., nursing, physician assistant), i.e., occupations which, because they require more contact with the body—more dirty work—have less status than the physician. Thus, although the physician receives high status from the public because s/he is thought to work with the

body to create order for a disordered body, s/he receives high status among physicians to the extent s/he can distance him/herself from actually working with the body. Thus, the status of a physician is not inherent in that profession, but rather it is based in this delegation of work (1958).

This example from the medical field provides a good example of the concept of “purity”. Good health conveys cleanliness. In medicine, the concepts of clean and dirty help generate the status hierarchy and the rigid division of labor. There is “no system in which the theme of uncleanness is so strong” as the medical system.” To bring a human or a non-human animal to health (which is cleanliness) is the great accomplishment in medicine, the “miracle.” Those who work such miracles are more than absolved from the implications of uncleanness of tasks involved in producing such miracles. But those in medicine who also perform tasks that are unclean but are not recognized as among the producers of the miracle fare badly in their status rating.

While the relationship between cleanliness and status is most evident in medicine, even in other fields with high status occupations there are differences within the occupation regarding “what is seen as honorable, respectable, clean and prestige-giving as against what is less honorable or respectable and what is mean or dirty” (Hughes 1958). In terms of the occupations known as the professions, Abbott conceptualizes “professional purity” within a profession in this way:

the highest status professionals are those who deal with issues predigested and predefined by a number of colleagues. These colleagues have removed human complexity and difficulty... Conversely, the lowest status professionals are those who deal with problems from which the human complexities are not or cannot be removed (1981:823-4).

Thus, for instance, the most respected among attorneys are not those who litigate in criminal or civil law courtrooms, TV drama style (although those may be the attorneys most esteemed by the public; see Gitlin, Abbott), where the dirtiness (complexity) of human life is displayed and cannot be made

whole. Rather, the highest status lawyers are those who practice law so as to resolve this complexity by using intellect and esoteric knowledge to order what the courtroom demonstrates is so disordered. In the US, these are attorneys who do appellate work, who work in Appeals courts, which Hughes describes as a “purified distillate of human mess”(1958:97). These are the attorneys who practice a more purified form of law.

Dirty Work and Funeral Directors

Funeral directing is an impure profession laden with dirty work. As previously noted, every occupation is made up of several or more activities. We can divide the activities of funeral directors into two domains: social and physical. For much of the occupation’s brief history, the tasks associated with each have been thought sufficiently distinct that they were considered two separate occupations—undertaker and embalmer. Over this history, the undertaker was responsible for what the field calls “front of the house” types of work. These are the “social” responsibilities of dealing directly with the family, arranging and putting on the funeral, and taking care of any paperwork with the family or with other entities, like the state, a medical facility or a religious organization. And the history of the industry shows the embalmer was responsible for the physical work of dealing with the dead body, i.e., retrieving it from the place of death, embalming and preparing it for viewing, and readying it for cremation. Again, in the industry, this kind of work would be described as very “back of the house,” i.e., behind closed doors and often with little or no contact with family or friends of the deceased.

In law and within the field of funeral directing, the relationship between these two sets of tasks has been debated for decades. Are they different jobs? If so, should there be different licenses? Should each be compelled to have both licenses? Or are they sufficiently related that a single license

suffices? Not surprisingly, in the U.S., answers to these questions were fought out in the courts. In his 1955 authoritative text on all things funeral, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, Robert Habenstein summarizes the general sense of court decisions across states: most ruled there should, indeed, be two separate licenses. To the courts, the two jobs “differ[ed] so clearly that to compel one to take an examination for the license of the other is interfering with his constitutional rights” (Habenstein 1955: 530).

In 1905, for example, both New York and Massachusetts passed laws requiring undertakers to have embalming licenses. Under the new Massachusetts law, a Cambridge undertaker, Benjamin Wyeth, was denied an undertakers license because he was not trained as an embalmer, despite his having been “engaged in the trade of an undertaker” for forty-six years! He argued he could do his job as undertaker, as the front of the house person, without knowing how to embalm, as he had for decades. In the event embalming was requested, he hired a licensed embalmer to do it. The Supreme Court of Massachusetts agreed: “we know of nothing connected with the duties of an undertaker that calls for the work of a licensed embalmer. When such work is desired, a proper person can be procured to perform it.”

The following year, William Ringe, a Brooklyn undertaker was convicted of having “unlawfully, willfully and knowingly engage[d] in and carr[ied] on the business of an undertaker.” He took his case to the court of appeals, which took as its starting point the Wyeth ruling that embalming and undertaking were distinct. But the New York court went further. It concluded that a law requiring an undertaker to have an embalming license was “an unnecessary and unwarrantable interference with constitutional rights.” The court challenged the veracity of the public health claims and questioned the true intention of the legislation. The justices “could not refrain from the thought that

the act in question was conceived and promulgated in the interest of those then engaged in the undertaking business” and was motivated more by “the prospective monopoly” potential of the law, than by the purported concerns for “general health, morals and welfare of the state.”

With that kind of language legally in place, Habenstein expected the debate would soon be resolved. There would be two different jobs requiring two different licenses. Eventually, the role debate *was* resolved, just not as Habenstein anticipated. In New York State, at least, claims about constitutional rights were lost. The state of New York has only one license: funeral director. This license covers both the social and physical domains of the jobs that were once, by New York law, separate occupations requiring separate licenses.

The tasks of a modern funeral director typically mix of what I have called the social and physical domains of being a funeral director: retrieving and possessing the body of the deceased (removals); making funeral plans (arrangements); preparing the body for viewing and burial (embalming); authorizing legal paperwork for the assumption and disposition of the body (death certificates, burial permits, transit or shipping paperwork); executing the funeral (flowers, coordinating cars, religious personnel, religious site); selling these services and related elements (mainly the casket, but also prayer and thank you cards, burial clothes and, increasingly, programs, photo and/or video montages). Even the most basic disposition—a direct cremation—requires employing a funeral director to authorize the paperwork, transport the body, return the ashes, and so on.

The work involved in accomplishing each of these tasks uses different skill sets. While mortuary schools train and licensing boards test aspiring funeral directors on both physical and social (including business activities) domains, in typical practice, funeral directors formally or informally

specialize in one or the other. This is an organic, de facto (though not necessarily de jure) separation of front and back of the house. This separation has implications for workplace dynamics and divisions of labor and for the industry at large. That they trade embalming out is important, speaks to how they see themselves, their skills, what's valued. Many funeral directors have not embalmed a body for years, others only embalm, while some do both and everything else in the set of tasks I described. In interviews with me, funeral directors often described themselves as drawn to, better at, or more natural at one or the other. For example, at one funeral home, Michael (attractive, personable, good at sales) was the "people" guy while Howard (not good with people) was the "body" guy. (To put a very fine point on the latter's lack of social skills, his manager said Howard was so bad with people that he wouldn't have him arrange a funeral for his, the manager's, dog.) The kinds of work of each domain also elicit very different reactions.

Complications that arise from the different roles.

In carrying out these tasks, the funeral director can serve as a grief counselor, salesman, medical personnel, event planner. These jobs are not only wildly distinct, but can conflict with each other or encroach on the work of others, especially other occupations deemed professional in the way conceptualized above. As a result, academic and popular writers, have for decades tripped over the question: what is the job of a funeral director? Answering that question is one of the goals of this dissertation. But rather than try to answer it abstractly, I answer it empirically: by watching and participating in the work that funeral directors do.

An occupation can be thought dirty in either or both of two ways: the different tasks that makes up a single occupation may be thought dirty or any one of the tasks may be thought dirty. In the case of funeral directoring, with its distinct domains and tasks within domains, to say nothing of it

consisting of two distinct occupations, it is particularly useful to keep this in mind. Both the physical and social domains of funeral directing have distinct dirty work elements. Their physical domain—work with bodies and death—is physically dirty; the social domain, which also includes the commercial tasks, is morally dirty.

While funeral directors carry out both moral and physical dirty work, neither is only stigmatizing. And yet this is not the whole experience: the same dirty elements are elevating. Elevation and stigma can occur at the same time. For funeral directors, the most prominent stigma relates to their physically dirty work, i.e., directly handling a dead body, in the literal sense of handling. Contact with death is a commonly cited example of physically dirty work in an occupation. But the dirtiness of the commercial elements of funeral directing not new. Consider Mitford’s searing critique in her book *The American Way of Death* (1963). In this work, Mitford vividly portrayed a world in which funeral directors “profit from death” and “exploit the grieving;” this portrait has long dogged the industry. She described funeral directors as “merchants of a rather grubby order, preying on the grief, remorse and guilt of survivors” (1963:13). Her scathing, take-down of funeral directing brought not only widespread public attention to the industry’s moral dirty work⁵ (exploiting and profiting from death), but also brought attention from state lawmakers and the Congress, an investigation by the Bureau of Consumer Protection, and hearings before the Federal Trade Commission starting in 1973. These hearings culminated in the “Funeral Rule” regulation (1984) that was designed to protect those grieving and seeking professional help from being exploited by funeral directors. This rule has had real and lasting implications on the day-to-day work and lives of funeral directors.

⁵ Mitford’s book seems to be the best known and most influential writing on the funeral industry. It focuses almost exclusively on the industry’s commercial practices, its moral dirty work. She perhaps may have written about the physical dirty work, but she was not able to get inside embalming/ preparation rooms.

For funeral directors, the stigma that gets attached to their tasks that are physically dirty is the elephant in the room. But the stigma that is most salient, most conspicuous to the public and to scholars as well as to funeral directors themselves is moral. I will think about this moral dirt as a consequence of categorical impurity. This categorical impurity arises in apart from role conflict. By role conflict, I mean the conflict that funeral directors have with themselves-conflict that comes out of their own multiple roles. The confusion and ambiguity that results from the multiple roles, the challenges they pose to categorization is a different kind of dirtiness than proposed by Hughes and others, but can be related and bring more nuance to understanding the status(es) and stigma(s) of funeral directing.

Dirty Work, generally distilled to ‘stigma in the workplace’, replicates the problem of status and stigma at large (status and stigma are interrelated). The overwhelming focus/ concept of dirty work is that dirty work is ‘stigmatized’ work. Dirty work originates with Hughes (1952). Goffman uses the same three categories in *Stigma* (1963). Here they are side by side. The third is how I see the application to funeral directors.

The three types		
Dirty Work <i>Hughes (1951,1958)</i>	Stigma <i>Goffman (1963)</i>	<i>Funeral Directors</i>
physical	physical	dead bodies
moral	moral	exploiting grief
social	tribal	who you serve

METHODS

Interviews

Peter Bearman, interested in studying funeral directors, enlisted his right hand employee, Fletcher Haulley. They read up on the topic - in history, sociology, popular media. Fletcher created a database of New York City funeral homes - nearly four hundred. Fletcher and I talked – in the office, on work breaks, at the bar. This sounded interesting to me. Fletcher asked if I’d help map funeral homes. Sure. One wall of his small shared office was covered, floor to ceiling, by a map of New

York. We geocoded the distribution of New York funeral homes, old-school style. I stood with the marker, Fletcher called out addresses. I don't remember how I officially got involved, but at some point, Peter asked if I would do pilot interviews. We developed an exploratory interview guide and began cold calling funeral directors.

Funeral directors get a lot of bad press: things that go wrong at a funeral home tend to make good ratings-bodies gone missing, crematories not cremating, the black market sale of body parts removed from corpses-all end up as exposes on the nightly news, scandals in the newspapers. They haven't fared much better outside the tabloids. Jessica Mitford's 1963 best selling book, *The American Way of Death*, still haunts the industry. With this in the back of my mind, I made the phone calls ready for rejection and pitched the interview as sterilely as I could: I was working for Professor who studies occupations-and wanted to study funeral directors. If (s)he hesitated, I jumped in with the assurance "I am not a journalist' and all of the protections of academic research. I asked for an hour appointment, assured them they could end it at any time if they got tired of me. Most interviews lasted 2-3 hours, others stretched to four and beyond. Funeral directors have irregular schedules, "someone can walk in at any time,' I was often told. Often it was an hour's notice, and I'd get in my car, bail on my 9-5 office job and travel around the city. Given their public image, I expected mostly rejections and was continuously surprised by participation⁶. In the end, I had only one explicit refusal.

This was not a random sample from the database. We wanted to explore the range of funeral homes (corporate, multi-generational, small and large), funeral directors (multi-generational and newcomers of different ages, genders, race and ethnicity). Initial interviews were semi-structured: we

⁶ For Torres, 20% of the funeral directors declined interviews, resulting in 29 interviews. (Torres, 1983).

collected basic information (entry to the profession, education, funeral home volume, neighborhood context) and asked questions on selected themes. Otherwise, they were largely open ended-interviewees were encouraged to discuss their particular area of expertise or interest.

The interview sample includes funeral directors across types of firms (small family to corporate, from traditional place based to itinerant, so called “hat hangers”), individuals from funeral families and newcomers. These initial semi-structured interviews provided valuable information about the landscape of the funeral industry in New York, career narratives of funeral directors, entry stories, memorable funerals (of gang members, mob soldiers, crime victims, family members), descriptions of the embalming process, community relations, professional associations, and the larger scale environment of the industry-trends, changes, lobbying and legislation and, of course, the looming threat of corporate monopoly.⁷ Most of this was familiar from the literature. We quickly encountered a regularly cited (in the academic and trade literatures) dichotomy-the corporate versus family owned establishments. Most of our sample was family owned. This was not entirely intentional. Corporate funeral homes are on the down low. They (intentionally) don’t advertise that they are corporate. Without knowing in advance or targeting the major corporate company, the sample includes funeral directors working at major corporations. I’ve heard (but never had it confirmed) that SCI does not allow interviews. But there we have it.

We were misled by the literature. What we did not find in the literature was this recurring theme among New York funeral directors: the puzzle (or, for some, the problem) of the “ethnic mismatch”-a mismatch that occurs across the city, across any city with changing neighborhoods.

From the reading we knew that funeral homes rarely change hands, turnover. They are the longest

⁷ *Six Feet Under*, the HBO series about a family owned funeral home and the looming corporate take over was popular at the time. I quickly learned not to bring it up during the corporate conversation.

lived firms on record. The conversations around ethnicity and race were direct, often blunt, matter of fact, unlike conversations in other workplaces, academia among them. Funeral directors routinely defined their funeral homes in terms of race or ethnicity, early on in conversation, maybe a shorthand way of orienting me to the place and the type of work, even life, they had. In some cases, race or ethnicity was part of the definition of the funeral home; in others, it was one step more distant. The funeral home may not be defined by the ethnicity-but they “work” they did was. There’s “Irish work,” “Jewish work,” “Caribbean work,” “Italian work, etc. the funeral directors referred to the service of different ethnic (and religious) communities as distinct types of “work” -i.e. “Irish work”, “Italian work”, “Caribbean work”, “Jewish work,” etc.

I started in the Bronx. In three of the earliest interviews, funeral directors introduced me to the phenomenon of the “traditional” funeral home. They sounded like a dying breed. A clear explanation of the “traditional” funeral home was hard to pin down, but I was given advice on where I should look, even if I wasn’t sure what I was looking for. These Bronx funeral directors pointed me to Brooklyn. That’s where the last of the “traditional” funeral homes are-the Italian funeral homes, especially. The funeral industry has a specific definition of a “traditional funeral.” The traditional funeral is a term recognized and fairly consistently used by historians, regulators, and funeral directors. The traditional funeral *home*, on the other hand, has no such equivalent. This is not a “type” that exists in the literature, nor one that we conceived of, however, since funeral directors said they existed, it seemed worth trying to find them. I turned my attention to Brooklyn.

Participant observation

A failed interview turned this into a field work project. At Cipolla and Son in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, Peter Cipolla (the son) refused to sit for an interview, but allowed me to accompany him

as he worked. After five hours, including a wake, a trip to the Department of Health and drink at downtown bar, I asked Peter why he wouldn't agree to an interview. He told me, "You can't learn about what we do by asking questions. It's a life. You need to stay here for like a week to understand what we do."⁸ I stayed off and on for over a year.

Selecting the other sites With race such a salient line in interviews, during participant observation, and across professional organizations, I selected two additional funeral homes to try to get other views of the racial and ethnic dynamics of the funeral industry. Garrozzo funeral home was, like Cipolla, owned by Italian Americans-that strongly identified as, and with, Italian Americans. Their neighborhood, Canarsie, has undergone radical change-a contentious integration in the 1990s. Once Italian and Jewish, Canarsie is now overwhelmingly Caribbean. The manager described the funeral home as "A Caribbean funeral home run by four Italian Americans." The third site, Franklin T. Armstrongs, is an African American owned, operated, and serving-funeral home in the South Bronx.

Selected, in part, to see different "types of work" as reported by funeral directors themselves. These outer borough field were selected primarily based on descriptions of their work provided by funeral directors during the initial interviews, rather than any demographic profile of the neighborhood. I later researched neighborhood demographics because I think both the funeral directors perceptions and the data are useful for thinking about the contours of the funeral home's "market." While the contexts are important to understanding the interactions, the project was not designed to

⁸ Peter's father, Frank, on the other hand, loved giving interviews. He was, in fact, a bit of a media darling. When I mentioned Peter's recalcitrance and his refusal to be recorded, his father offered this slightly cryptic but eventually decipherable explanation: "Oh, baby. I'm sorry about that. You know, I'm not surprised.. it's the things I exposed him to growing up. It was probably too much.." Before I could ask what this exposure was, he continued, "You know, when he was in front of the grand jury, they kept trying to make him say yes or no... it was a lot of questions. I'm not surprised he didn't want to be taped."

demonstrate causal relationships between context and racial attitudes (or any version of group threat racism (cf. Blumer 1958; McDermott 2006).

I spent hundreds of hours in three New York City funeral homes-accompanying funeral directors on their day to day activities: “going out” on funerals, picking up bodies from homes and hospitals, delivering bodies to the crematory, observing embalmings, unloading casket deliveries, serving food, distributing tissues/ programs/ flowers, sitting in on funeral arrangements.

The irregular pace of work is such that, even at the busiest location, there was abundant down time. So, I also spent a good deal of time: hanging out with funeral directors and friends/ neighborhood visitors, watching television, playing video games, running errands (often personal, almost always in a hearse). Regular visits to the funeral homes gave me the opportunity to observe a range of interactions between funeral directors and family members, clergy, morgue attendants, hospital personnel, funeral attendees and amongst themselves. I was able to see how things happened, how people interacted, what kinds of decisions were made and how funeral directors talked about the decisions as they made them.

Through interviews, I became familiar with basic ideas of how funeral directing worked and what a day at a funeral home might look like, but moving from interviews to participant observation allowed me to consider and contrast accounts and observations. This was particularly true in the case of conversations and interactions around race. While funeral directors frequently described their work and themselves in racial terms, getting at the meaning of these terms, how they were evaluated by the people using them can be difficult in the relatively fleeting context of an interview between strangers with little to go on but ascribed characteristics. Cipollas, the first field site, solidified my

growing interest in the racial segmentation of the market and made clear the advantages of participant observation over interviews for pursuing this.

Both Frank and Peter Cipolla were quick to tell me that their was primarily Italian-American, from their “community.” Over time, however, it became clear (and eventually, explicit) that they only grudgingly buried non-Italian whites and that they have not and *will not* bury Blacks-not even the man who has worked for them for over twenty years.

Garozzos in Canarsie, the second location, was selected as a possible negative case to Cipolla. There were obvious similarities (funeral directors strongly identifying as Italian-American, Italian funeral homes in changing neighborhoods) but even more striking differences (one buried no Blacks, the other buried mostly Caribbean Blacks; one was struggling for business, the other was booming). The contrast between interviews and participant observation again loomed large. During our initial interview Steve Sebbetto, the manager, was pragmatic about the racial change in Canarsie: “It was good for business.” But with time and familiarity, that line was replaced, or rather overwhelmed, by a much wider range of reactions, mostly negative - from mildly insulting descriptions of “those people” to ape imitations and outright racial epithets.

Conventions

Throughout the project, I attended funeral director conventions. Funeral director conventions are a window into the larger industry-outside the unique environment of New York City. They were an opportunity to informally talk to funeral directors, to see how they interacted with each other rather. I could see what the “threats” facing funeral homes were, the questions and concerns funeral directors themselves raised.

There are dozens of funeral director associations. The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) is the oldest (1884) and with approximately 20,000 members, the largest. Through the 1960s, the NFDA refused membership to black funeral directors. While obviously there's no longer formal segregation, at the national, state, and local levels, there are multiple organizations that, on paper, are open to all, but in practice, are quite segregated. Most have similar names (NFDA, NFD&MA, NYSFDA, etc) and were often distinguished by their membership- "The National" (unspecified), "The Black National", "The Local" (unspecified), "The Black Local", or "The Jewish" association. Given the concerns of this project, I focused on three organizations: The National (NFDA), The Black national (NFDMA) and The State (NYSFDA).

At conventions, I attended business roundtables and continuing education units (seminars and lectures on a range of topics including: Are you an order taker or an undertaker? Valuing diversity in the workplace, Women in funeral service, Alternative solutions to common embalming problems, The laws of money: The power to control your own destiny.) I also participated in social events both formal (awards dinners, an "Undertakers Ball," a casket company sponsored cocktail party) and informal (gatherings at the convention bar, impromptu group outings). I interviewed current and past presidents of the national associations, leaders of various committees (education, political action, membership) and informally interviewed funeral directors and funeral supply vendors from across the country.

Chapter Overview

Part I

Chapter One is the industry's perspective on professional status, their strategies and frames, their celebration, elevation of the "dirty work" as their claim to status.

Both claims put forth by the industry were body based-securing the "body monopoly"-to use Hughes' term. The first, that embalming was scientific, sanitary, a specialized skill. When that fell apart, they offered a second claim: the embalmed body was important to psychological health, grieving, healing. The question of: is funeral directing a profession-is a tension, suspended even, between the question of legal status and "cultural" status. One boundary-the legal, definitional, largely-mattered to the industry-especially early on: jurisdiction, licensing, formal procedures, the formula, the checklist of professionalism.

It got more complicated when cremation, not a question of law, licensing or lobbying legal question, not a licensing, legislation type obstacle, but a cultural shift, became the primary "threat" to the industry, to the viability, and the status, of the profession. They ended up conceding some of the cultural status .) Both of these come under attack, were picked apart: officially, scientifically — most thoroughly and publicly during the Federal Trade Commission hearings of the 1970s. This is important because it sets up the contrast between the industry and individual funeral directors. The industry was singularly focused on one set of concerns-the status of the profession at large-laws protecting authority, matching benchmarks of "established" professions.

Chapter Two turns to the disconnect between the industry and local funeral directors-in relationship to the specific claims made by the industry. It takes the major professional claims put forth by the

industry (both body related, different logics, Stinchcombe's equifinality) and look at them from the ground-experiences and interpretations by individual funeral directors how they see their roles, their occupation, what they take pride in. Sometimes this is consistent with the industry, but there's a lot of messiness. Chapter two also shows how the industry's own actions, especially its financial structuring, undermined their claims.

The industry was laser focused on the "body monopoly"-legal jurisdiction over their locus of control, a technical, bureaucratic aspects of professionalism. When the cultural tide of cremation hit, the industry scrambled to maintain their claim to professionalism. Cremation threatened the profitability, viability, relevance and the status of the funeral industry. This storyline, entirely centered on cremation, personalization, "funerals" gives too much credit to upper middle class, largely white, baby boomer individualism.

The industry ignored difference in funeral practice by class, race, ethnicity. It overlooked the fact that funeral homes are spatially, community, neighborhood located. By focusing only on the "body monopoly," they were unprepared for, unconcerned with, this other dimension of professionalism-the "body of wants," the cultural authority, the forms of legitimacy and status derived from local contexts and dynamic.

Part II

Chapters Three and Four turn to these dynamics of status largely ignored by the industry. Individual funeral directors operate in this world of the "body of wants." These are largely place, community, context based.

There's no shortage of funeral related research. There is, however, very little about class, local differences. The second part of the dissertation draws primarily on participant observation at three New York City funeral homes: Cipolla and Son and Garozzos in Brooklyn (Chapter Three), Armstrongs in the South Bronx (Chapter Four) and two conventions: the New York State Funeral Directors Convention in Poughkeepsie and the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association's 75th Anniversary convention in Las Vegas.

Individual funeral directors operate in the world of the "body of wants." There, funeral directors have multiple ways they can derive status-and experience stigma. These are place, community, context based. That is, threats to individual funeral directors, neighborhood funeral homes are often different than those imagined and targeted by the industry. The difference emerges from these neighborhood, race, and class dynamics in funeral environments. Status is defined in context, communities, and in the relationship of the server to the served. The "threats" to the status of the "industry" writ large (primarily, cremation) overlooks the other threats to status -and possibilities for status. Local funeral directors also "suffer" stigmas never described in the dirty work literature or by the industry - imagined by the industry or written about by stigma/ dirty work scholars.

Chapter Three focuses on two Italian American owned funeral homes in Brooklyn: In the face of neighborhood changes, Garozzos chose different responses - with starkly different outcomes. The decisions and the outcomes reflected and impacted both their bottom lines and their experiences - their perception of the meaning of their work. One chose to serve the new population, the other resisted change. Garozzos is a "Caribbean funeral home run by four Italian guys." The threat to Garozzos is Haitians. This opens the box of community context, race, serving your own, performance of professionalism, social distance, the choice between money and status.

CHAPTER ONE

Status & Stigma in the Funeral Industry

Historical antecedents

The most complete monopoly I can think of in our society is that of the undertaker. No one escapes him. The core of his activity is the urgent and necessary disposal of human remains... His domain... is expanded by his exploitation of some of the deepest of human sentiments and of some of the tragi-comic aspects of the culture of the survivors. Around an almost irreducible core the undertaker creates – in interaction with his clients – a body of wants and then seeks to satisfy them (Hughes 1970:150).

Between the body monopoly and the body of wants, we find the unusual history and the tensions including between the status and stigma, of funeral directing.

Funeral directing "emerged from two different occupational strains: a tradesman or purveyor of merchandise and a technician or professional who was knowledgeable in anatomy and chemistry. Today, this double occupational identity continues. As those who have studied the occupational sociology of this industry have noted, funeral practitioners have continuously tried to move from the lower status occupational identity of merchants or tradesmen to the higher status identity of professionals or skilled technicians" (Federal Trade Commission 1978:39-40). In the late nineteenth century, lots of occupations organized, set out to professionalize. Undertakers, the more "established" occupation by the mid nineteenth century, capitalized on the emerging science of embalming in their organizational, associational, and professional efforts. Early in their organizational efforts, the nascent funeral industry embraced embalming as the way forward at a time when public health concerns were taking hold.

In 1883, Allen Durfee, first president of the National Funeral Directors association, attributed the "Progress of the Profession" to embalming. Embalming "revolutionized the methods of the

profession, elevating the keeping of the body to [the] completeness and certainty of an exact science" (quoted in Farrell 1980: 151). The industry sought the additional professional prestige that they believed could come with this "exact science." They capitalized on the public health movements, concern over sanitation and epidemics, and modeled their organizational efforts after doctors - the prototypical professionals of the time. The appeal to science and sanitation had multiple audiences -- the public, but also funeral directors. According to industry historians, the appeal to science and sanitation would improve their image and status with the public and their own self-conception, helping them "rise above the traditional status of providers of funeral paraphernalia and factotums of burial" to a "self-image of the progressive funeral director of the late 19th century as a sanitarian. "His role as "sanitary embalmer," in a period when epidemics and plagues led to widespread fear of disease, conceivably enhanced the public estimation of his work, and consequently his own"(Habenstein1955:306).

Professionalizing efforts

The NFDA leadership was, from the outset "highly dedicated to the proposition that a program of action was essential to bring professional status to funeral directors"... They started a deliberate campaign to hit the benchmarks at the first convention. President took to the floor and called for funeral directors to model themselves after the established professions - law and medicine. Their first actions were organizing a professional association (explicitly modeled after established professions, not trade associations) and lobbying for legislation. There was still more work to do. The president walked through [licensing, educational requirements, board of examiners, health, by-laws, codes of ethics,]but emphasized the importance of professional behavior -all of the other things were "means to a desired end" but "one thing that would do more... ; if we gain professional

fame it will be by us as individuals leading pure, upright, professional lives" (Habenstein 1955:307).
Early on, they secured legal jurisdiction over the transport and disposal of dead bodies.

Historians and regulators agree: from the outset, the funeral industry sought status recognition through the legislative process of licensing. According to the Federal Trade Commission (1978):

In the late 19th century, funeral directors sought, through occupational licensure, the higher status and greater social acceptance enjoyed by professionals. The public health concerns of the time, the quasi-scientific/medical character of embalming and the social importance of carrying out post-death activities were stressed in industry efforts to persuade state legislatures that practitioners of funeral directing and embalming should be licensed... Their desire for greater status was also the principal impetus behind drives to establish national trade associations, recognized trade schools and state licensing mechanisms that would secure the higher social esteem of professionals (102,36).

State regulation (and recognition) of the industry was supported by public and industry concerns. The public had a "growing concern over sanitation;" the industry had a growing interest in status. They, according to historians and the FTC, saw state recognition and licensing as a "step up the occupational ladder." Two arguments, according to historians, persuaded the state legislatures to recognize and license embalmers: public health concerns and the scientific, public health claims about embalming. Licensing, according to historians and congressional reports, was the key mechanism for the achievement of higher social status (Federal Trade Commission 1978:102). Licensing successes, argued Habenstein, underscored their claim to practitioners in a profession rendering necessary important, personal services legitimated by the community" (1955:40).

By emphasizing the science, linking embalming to the established (and licensed) profession of medicine, the industry achieved a major breakthrough in their status benchmarks. In short, the link to public health, sanitation, "the association with members of the medical profession, sanitarians, and public health officials" was the logic on which the industry based its claim to status. The

mechanism for securing status was licensing. Funeral directors seized on the opportunity provided by public health concerns to improve their status through licensing in the model of other professionals.

By the end of the 19th century, most states required licenses for embalmers. According to historian, Laderman, “The 20th century was indeed the “embalming century.” [Embalming] gave funeral directors the necessary authority, purpose, and values, to promote their services to the living in a credible, profitable, and meaningful way”(Laderman 2003:xix). For a moment, it seemed possible that the 20th century would be the “embalming century.” Despite early ambivalence, even wariness, of embalming, the Civil War changed many minds. First, was the sheer ability of transporting civil war dead back to the north for burial. Embalming’s best advertiser, convincer, public rallier - was the body of Abraham Lincoln. Thanks to the “miracle” of embalming, the body of the assassinated president was viewed by thousands of Americans as his The lowering and closing is a slow, unceremonious, loudly industrial process. funeral procession traveled from Illinois to Washington, DC.

Status was the expected benefit of combining the occupations. Role conflict and a new kind of stigma -- dirtiness -- was an unintended consequence. Combining the social service components of funeral directing with the traditional undertaking components, led to a myriad of problems, it multiplied and tangled up the stigmas that were once clearly and more accurately associated with one side of their activity or the other. Failure to separate these components, despite the compelling evidence, compounded and confused the sources of dirt. Each job - which had its own dirtiness already - took on the dirtiness of the other - whether or not they did the tasks. So, everyone got dirtier - plus (or maybe this is the same as) categorically dirty.

The main question in "the literature" is: are they professional?

Held up to various metrics, funeral directors were generally (sometimes memorably) dismissed as "not professional." Usefully (to me and to the authors) funeral directors confounded some of the categories, and by doing so, illustrated the margins of professionalism. This was not because their "skill" was insufficiently theoretical or esoteric, but rather it arose from their orientation. Their skill was not the issue. Harold Wilensky, for example, uses funeral directors as an example of a profession that meets all of his criteria in the "process of professionalization", and yet, declares funeral directing "a doubtful profession," their claim to professionalism "honored by no one but themselves." Wilensky does not take issue with funeral director's claim to embalming as a specialized skill, he argues that because of their "market orientation," funeral directors fail to meet the "service ideal" therefore, are not professionals (Wilensky 1964:142).

To the simple yes or no question: Is funeral directing a profession? The answer was generally no – even though funeral directing has most of the characteristics of a profession. It is a full-time occupation, requires specialized training and licensing, has a professional association, code of ethics, and a specialized skill – key characteristics of the so-called "checklist" approach to professionalism. Sociologists consistently argued that embalming, with its association with science and the paradigmatic profession – medicine –provided the occupation with the most successful claim to professional status (Bowman 1954; Howarth 1996; Cahill 1995; Torres 1983; Laderman 2003). While embalming may be the most specialized skill, thereby shoring up claims to professionalization, it is also a "ritually impure" - intimately involved with the human body – characteristics which lower an occupation's prestige. As Cahill points out, this contradiction between the distinctiveness and dirtiness of this role places funeral directors in an unusual position because they cannot "publicly

tout their occupationally distinctive and technically impressive embalming skills in any detail without certain callousness and contamination"(Cahill 1995:125).

Academics and popular writers often marvel over the many roles funeral directors play. And as often, writers trip over the question: what is the job? Are these occupations considered separate? Lloyd Warner devotes one of his Yankee City series to this question. He describes the funeral director as a "private enterpriser" who sells goods and services for a profit, but as a "skilled artisan," an "expert embalmer" with medical knowledge, and yet, "above all, a competent stage manager" (Warner 1965:315). Kathy Charmaz writes that funeral directing might fit into "several different categories" of work, including: "an entrepreneurial business, a profession, a service occupation, a complex organization, or a commercial trade"(Charmaz 1980:190). Jessica Mitford asks, rhetorically, whether the funeral director primarily merchant, embalmer, lay psychiatrist, or a combination of all of these" (1963:154). And so in the literature, the funeral director is seen to run a variety of distinct jobs—from grief counselor to salesperson; from medical personnel to event planner. These jobs are not only wildly distinct, but can conflict with each other or encroach on the work of others, especially other occupations deemed professional.

The Department of Labor (DOL), unsurprisingly, has a more concise 'ruling' on the question than do the departments of sociology. According to the DOL, no funeral directors are not professionals. Like Wilensky, the DOL weights the business side of funeral directing quite heavily. They "have more in common with retail sales" than professionals. By the same ruling and logic, however, the department is open to considering embalming/ undertaking as a) distinct and b) more likely professional. In contrast to funeral directors, according to the DOL, embalmers would seem to have a more professional status" (Whittaker 2005:1).

Role conflict with ministers.

Mid-century studies mostly focused on the encroachment of the funeral director into the realm of ministers. The conflict comes out of the usurpation of the funeral responsibilities from the minister by the funeral director. In earlier decades, the minister was clearly in charge of the funeral services. He would enlist the services of "the cabinet maker or the church sexton" to "lay out the dead." Now? Ministers "discover that the cabinet maker who assisted him yesterday in the conduct of a funeral, today not only offers to take complete charge of the funeral, but also is prepared to hold the service in his own "chapel." This was problematic for the clergy in two respects – the first related to their claims over a monopoly of religious rituals, and the second with respect to their own status claims. Previously, the minister had "comparable or greater prestige in the American community than his professional colleagues, i.e., the doctor, lawyer, or dentist." For the clergy, the usurpation of their role by "cabinet makers and sextons" was not only "galling personally" but also "contrary to the tenets of their faith" (Fulton 1961:322).

The affront on the tenets of faith is a little nebulous - but it does cross into the territory – one of the bases for of the distinct claim to legitimacy underlying the clerics role in society. So, the religious infringement was a professionalization move. According to Fulton, the clergy resented funeral directors because of their "dual role." "As a businessman, the funeral director is caught up in the mechanics of commerce, but as a professional person he finds himself identified with the sacred aspects of the funeral" (Warner 1965: 317).

In his studies of Yankee Town, Warner (1965) observed that

There was an increasing tendency on the part of the undertaker to borrow the ritual and sacred symbols of the minister and other professional men to provide an outward cover for what he is and does...Although the social processes continued to turn the role of the undertaker from that of a businessman into professional mortician, there was a considerable hostility [to this shift from minister to funeral director (317).

The roles were clearly distinct, according to Warner. The most obvious sign of this was the difference in compensation: "The clearest distinction in the two roles might be summarized by the fact that the undertaker makes a business profit whereas, the minister is given a professional fee. To hold this hostility in check it was necessary for funeral directors to surround themselves with sacred symbols and to "profess a very high code of ethics." These uplifting efforts were, of course, often successfully attacked (Warner 1965:317-318).

But the tension was not simply between funeral directors and ministers. Wherever funeral directors' practices encroached on other professions' claims to unique authority, critical commentary followed. Consider, for example, Charmaz, who wrote that they attempt to give an impression of possessing the kind of technical expertise and competence that characterize the physician's role. Despite these impressions their claims for professional status cannot be substantiated" (194). Fulton who wrote that: "When an impression of being professional is created with similarities to both physicians and clergy, funeral directors gain greater authority and control over the situation. In addition, they attempt to give an impression of possessing the kind of technical expertise and competence that characterize the physician's role" (Charmaz 1980:194). In its core elements, repeating Fulton's study, Bradfield and her co-authors predicted that the conflict would increase in the decades since Fulton's important early work simply because the status of funeral directors had continued to rise while the status of ministers had continued to deteriorate. Among the clergy, only 12% of them regarded funeral directors as professionals (the rest saw them as either businessmen or dual professional/businessmen) - "This is true despite the fact that funeral directors have presented themselves as professionals, with accompanying codes of conduct and accrediting bodies" (Bradfield 1980: 345,347). Specifically, in terms of role conflict: "the majority of respondents emphasized that the funeral director's role should be confined to taking care of the "physical" arrangements for the

funeral... "funeral directors were "too business oriented" or "attempted to usurp" the clergy's role by providing counseling or religious advice (348).

In this context, academic and popular writers have for decades tripped over the question: what is the job of a funeral director? Answering that question—or the struggle to answer that question— offers insight into public's response to the profession. According to funeral director-cum-sociologist, Vanderlyne Pine (1975), the public is:

ambivalent in its attitudes toward and acceptance of the funeral director ... [because] ... the rights and duties of the funeral director are not well-defined, and [so] occupational conflicts may arise because different segments of society expect him (sic) to perform or refrain from performing different tasks (37).

This is a good starting point.

According to Torres "although the funeral industry did gain licensure and educational requirements in most states as did other professions, it never attained the full legitimacy of occupations like law or medicine" (1988:383). Torres offered the following conclusion that accounts as well as anything for the stagnation in the evolution of professional credentials for funeral directors: The status of funeral directors as professionals peaked during the 1950s. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the industry was subjected to bad publicity and investigations by federal agencies, among them the Justice Department and Federal Trade Commission. As a result, the momentum of professionalizing was lost in all states, and, in at least one state [Colorado], professional authority for funeral directing was abolished. In contrast, despite numerous challenges to its authority across time, medicine maintained its unparalleled status because of its ability to create two critical sources of effective control: legitimacy and dependence, where legitimacy is the recognition of the superior competence of the person to whom authority is being granted and dependence is the awareness of the potential for negative consequences of not relying on the expertise of those in whom authority is granted.

Thus, cultural authority is granted completely voluntarily by citizens to qualified professionals because there is a perceived need for their expertise (Starr 1982:9-10, 49).

A brief History

Undertakers have a monopoly over the disposal of human remains. Before undertaking was an occupation, burying bodies was something that anyone could do. To bury a body in a cemetery, church or graveyard, required a permit or authorization usually from a city official or a church sexton, but, unlike today, undertakers were not the only ones able to secure these permits. In the early 20th century, the funeral industry successfully made the case that dead bodies were a public health and sanitation concern and required specialized handling - which funeral directors were uniquely qualified to provide. In most states, they convinced legislatures to pass laws giving the industry a legally sanctioned monopoly over dead bodies. While sociologists have spent decades debating the details of professional status, most agree that a basic feature of a profession is the ability of the group to make a claim over a certain area of work. By this metric funeral directors do reasonably well. Through laws and licensing, funeral directors have secured an exclusive claim - a monopoly - over a core area of their work: the disposal of the dead. A legally supported and sanctioned monopoly is a particularly strong claim over an area of work. Securing jurisdiction over the disposal of bodies was one of the industry's earliest and most successful professionalization moves.

Having a monopoly on disposing of dead bodies was a good start, but body deliverymen are not precisely professionals and the industry has, since the beginning, set its eyes on respect as a profession. A professional claim requires more than this functional role (especially a functional role that, in isolation, is just about dirty, stigmatized work.) To elevate the occupation, funeral directors

needed to make a legitimate claim to a skill, some knowledge or special authority - beyond the practical, albeit important, matter of corpse disposal. To use Hughes' framework: the starting point of their professional claim is a monopoly over the disposal of the dead, that's the "urgent and necessary" core of the work. But to make a profession of it, undertakers needed to expand their domain, to create, around their core activity, a "body of wants" that they can fulfill.

Chronic fight for status

Hughes describes this tension between provider and consumer as a "chronic fight for status." Workers across many occupations, "Consider themselves the best judges of how their work should be done, but in many cases must yield their judgment to "amateurs" – their paying customers" (1958:54).

In Weber's classic formulation, authority is the probability that people will obey a command recognize as legitimate according to the prevailing rules in their society (Weber 1978). But authority applies not only to commands and action, but also refers to "the probability that particular definitions of reality and judgments of meaning and value will prevail as valid and true". Paul Starr (1982) calls this type of authority "cultural authority" (control or influence over ideas, definitions of fact and value) to distinguish it from the authority over action. Whereas they have control over the body, and that control is formally supported by law, expanding their domain beyond this instrumental role was a function of the professional authority of the industry.

The problem was, of course, that professional authority, according to Paul Starr, "involves not only skill in performing a service, but also the capacity to judge the experience and needs the clients"(Starr 1982:15). Professionals have particular knowledge that gives them a kind of license to

say what is best for the non-professional, to dictate what a client needs" (Charmaz 1980:190). And this is really the danger the feds zeroed in on. The NFDA grabbed on to this professional authority, argued that funeral directors, as death professionals, were best suited to judge the needs of mourners.

The claim to this kind of authority returns us to embalming, the "very heart and soul of the industry." While funeral directors secured formal control of the body, their real professional challenge was (and remains) the set of claims they are able to make about their specialized skill: embalming. How they got the public to accept embalming - as a thing to do, as a skill, as a professional claim - changed over time. "As the bedrock of the emergent industry, embalming required specialized knowledge, technical training, and professional service - qualities undertakers assumed would legitimate their enterprise and win them public favor" (Laderman 2003:6).

One textbook described embalming as the foundation of the entire funeral structure - it's the guardian of public health, the focus of funeral education, the reason for protective legislation, and the "professional facet of the industry" (Frederick and Strub, 1967). Critics of the industry, like Mitford, presented this foundation as fundamentally unsound. Embalming was the basis of the industry, yes, but an industry that was a "vast funereal charade... foisted on the indiscriminating, senseless American public by unscrupulous, mercenary capitalists" (Laderman 2003:xxii). Like Mitford, cultural sociologist George Sanders walks the reader through the dazzling array of products (teddy bear urns, NASCAR themed caskets) and services (shooting your ashes up into space, turning your ashes into a coral reef/fireworks/ paperweight) found in trade magazines and at conventions to show "how tradition, ritual, and even individual's relationships with the dead are being manufactured, shaped, and sold" by the influential funeral industry (Sanders 2010:64). In other

words, the common storyline about the funeral industry is one of an occupation with a monopoly over its instrumental role and a strong, albeit less clearly defined, claim over its cultural role – shaping, directing, and influencing funeral practices.

Sanders, especially, is careful to concede that no culture industry is entirely top-down. While he focuses on how "our relationships with the dead are being manufactured, shaped and sold", he notes that, "like all culture industries, agentic individuals can disrupt commodifying processes that might otherwise trivialize human action and the products of labor" (Sanders 2010:64).

Meanwhile, the industry itself is focused on its declining influence. Anxiety about the future of the industry pervades publications and conventions – with dire predictions of the “extinction of funeral service,” seminars on reclaiming “cultural authority,” convention sessions on how to be “an undertaker, not an order-taker.” And this is why the clearest threat to the funeral industry, the source of the most anxiety, is cremation. Even though funeral directors secured a strong, legally sanctioned claim over the disposition of the body, cremation threatened to undermine the industry because it challenged their authority and claim to expertise - which they tied to the embalmed body and traditional funeral. Their authority was predicated on the embalmed body. If they could not convince the public that the embalmed body was central to death rituals, funeral directors themselves were not central. Funeral directors - as a group, as an industry - are losing control.

The threats that funeral directors see almost always start with cremation. Cremation reduces profits and sidelines funeral directors. In response, they’re seeking alternate offerings. These might make up for lost profits. But it’s not the same as funeral directing. There was a particular status in the “old” form of funeral directing, and it is debatable to say that the event planner version is a step down. On

one hand, the event planner does have less “control.” On the other, event planning can be more creative. The decoupling from “serious” institutions (eg the church), and from cultural and religious tradition, however, raises, for many, questions about the “seriousness” of the profession. But there is another story as well, which is that status arises from the kinds of people one handles. Here there is an irony. The lower the status of the dead person, the more traditional the funeral. And so losses to status from handling socially contaminated people (e.g poor people) are mitigated by gains arising from the capacity to deliver a traditional funeral. This means that if a funeral director wants to keep the “old” status, he can work with a lower status group. Meanwhile, those who strive for a new status handle the elite. But they no longer provide funerals. Instead, they are doing celebrations of life.

Under control 1900-1950s

Three strands describe this period. The first is the early threat of cremation, the second is professional efforts to check off boxes towards being defined as a profession. The third is broad cultural shifts in experience with death. I consider each, briefly below.

Cremation threats

In theory, cremation has been a threat to funeral directors from the outset. Modern cremation and embalming techniques not only were developed at the same time, but, unsurprisingly, advocates of appealed to the same logics to claim control over dead bodies: sanitation and public health. Cremation offered additional appeal to the 19th century culture. Cremation appealed to Puritan simplicity and the American "tendency toward utilitarianism and iconoclasm." And it showed early potential as the American way of death - enough so that by the late 19th century, “It already begins to dispute with burial for the possession of the discarded husk of man”(Bigelow 1886). The nascent

funeral industry was alarmed, but "lacked the social power, cultural authority and organizational expertise" to launch an effective campaign against cremation (Prothero 2001:134) .

In reality, cremation hit road blocks entirely independent of the funeral industry: infrastructure and institutionalized religion. Nineteenth century religious leaders denounced cremation as “anti-Christian.” In fact, there is no doctrinal conflict between Christian teachings and cremation. There was, however, an accessible, popularized, compelling associations with paganism, barbarism and the fires of hell. The Catholic Church officially prohibited creation in 1886, a ban that would remain in place for nearly 100 years. At the same time, crematoriums are expensive to build. Neither politicians nor entrepreneurs were interested in crematory construction. In the US, absent capital investment from governments, crematorium construction lagged behind. And it is hard to see how one could make money by building a crematorium. Cremation was not an entrepreneurial dream. By the turn of the century, there were only a handful of crematories in the United States. The lack of infrastructure slowed the early promise of cremation. Through most of the 20th century, cremation rates stagnated at one percent of the population. The boom of the 1960s brought it to 4%!

Broad changes

As death rates fell and life expectancy increased, people were less familiar with death, less equipped, comfortable, likely, or expected to deal with the sick, dying, and dead themselves. Whereas death was a familiar experience for previous generations of Americans by the mid century this was no longer the case. Whereas people used to get sick and die at home and were generally cared for - during their illness and after death - by friends and relatives, by the 20th century, Americans were dying older, sicker, and increasingly in institutions, cared for by paid professionals. Death became more distant, medicalized, institutionalized - and professionalized (Aries 1981, Blauner 1966, Gorer

1955). “In the fifties,” writes historian Prothero, “the bereaved typically deferred to the authority of funeral directors... who saw it as their sacred duty to steer customers to what they condescendingly knew was best” (2001:200). These broad changes created a space in which the funeral industry, and funeral directors, could operate.

By the 1950s, funeral directing achieved the key benchmarks of the process of professionalization (the dominant functionalist frame of the time). There were university based training programs, a professional association, a code of ethics, licensing laws. Even though funeral directors hit these functional(ist) benchmarks, sociologists routinely dismissed funeral directors as exceptions to the “rule.” They were a “marginal profession” or “semi-profession” - or “their claim to professionalism believed by no one but themselves,” Others granted they had “full professional status” but lacked the legitimacy of “more developed occupations like law or medicine” (Torres 1988:382).

Many sociologists came to dismiss the checklist approach altogether. Paul Starr suggests that we consider the benchmarks in a different light. According to Starr (1982):

Professional claims, of course, should not be simply taken at face value. The rewards a professional status encourage would-be and even established professions to invent or elaborate credentials, sciences, and codes of ethics and bids for recognition....Rather than as *indicators* of professional status, such features should be seen as the *means* of legitimating professional authority, achieving solidarity among practitioners, and gaining a grant of monopoly from the state (15-16).

Losing control: 1960s

1963 was a bad year for the funeral industry. In August 1963, Jessica Mitford published *The American Way of Death*. After Mitford, “Funeral directing would never be the same again”(Laderman 2003: xxi). In response to “mounting public concern raised by Mitford’s book,” multiple state and federal agencies launched investigations into the funeral industry. Just months after Mitford’s book,

the New York Bureau of Consumer Fraud and Protection investigation and calls for "corrective legislation" were front page news. Other states and feds followed suit. Legislation would not be necessary, argued a lawyer for the industry because "the industry was effectively policing itself through a rigidly enforced professional code"(Schanberg 1963).

Then came the federal investigations - the Department of Justice, the Federal Trade Commission and the Bureau of Consumer protections. The hearings begin in the early 1970s and continue throughout the decade - making headlines and keeping the industry busy. By 1975, with findings of industry wide abuses - deceptive sales tactics, customer manipulation, unfair market practices, the FTC and the BCP called on the federal government to intervene to intervene, protect consumers, and regulate the funeral industry. As the hearings drew to a close, *The New York Times* anticipated the regulations, would "control undertakers as never before - not as professionals but as businessmen who have deceived and abused the public and are in need of regulation" (Severo 1978).

These governmental investigations and subsequent regulation were a serious blow to the autonomy of the funeral industry. For sociologist David Torres, the professionalization story ends here. Torres, who traces the industry's efforts, argues that with all the bad publicity surrounding Mitford's book, federal investigations, and hearings, these investigations, "the momentum of professionalizing was lost in all states, and, in at least one state, professional authority for funeral directing was abolished" (1983:382).

The industry spent twelve years fighting the Federal Trade Commission, resisting regulations, insisting on its professional authority. The regulations were not only unnecessary, they were also an affront to the industry. They did not need additional regulations - they were professionals! It was,

according to *The Washington Post*, "One of the longest challenges from an industry group in commission history" (quoted in Torres 1983:384). The central claim of the industry centered on their professional authority, which involves distinctive claims to legitimacy grounded in ideas about professionalism - including: validation of the knowledge or competence, knowledge based on rational scientific grounds, and that the professional's advice is oriented towards a set of substantive values (and importantly, the advice is not primarily driven by a financial incentive).

For almost a century, the funeral industry staked their legitimacy on the science of embalming and sanitation claims. By the 1960s, they changed their claim. It was still centered on embalming (the body is their central control point) but the rationale was new. Embalming wasn't pitched as science or public health (those claims fell apart), rather, it was embalming that enabled the proper psychological processing of grief. Their specialized knowledge was about grief - and specifically the vital role of the embalmed body in the proper management of grief. The funeral director was positioned as a grief expert, "a professional who possesses specialized information and assists customers in coping with their emotional trauma" (Federal Trade Commission 1978:59-60).

To support their claim, the NFDA enlisted (and commissioned) experts: anthropologists, psychologists, theologians, and sociologists. These experts testified at congressional hearings, wrote books, published articles, producing a vast "industry sponsored literature which asserts that anything other than the full, traditional funeral is a threat to the mental health of the bereaved survivors" (Federal Trade Commission 1978:59-60).

In the wake of Mitford's book and the flurry of terrible publicity, the NFDA tried to rally the troops in defense of the profession. To the irritation of the industry leaders - who spent the better part of

the 1970s fighting the menaces of bad publicity, federal investigations and legislation by creating industry publicity materials, offering public relations propaganda and strategies - local funeral homes did not rally, did not use the public relations materials or strategies. At the 1964 convention, NFDA counsel scolded the membership: Without the cooperation "manifested by words and actions of you individually and as a group, and unless you promulgate the policies of NFDA, the future for funeral service as a profession is in doubt" (Federal Trade Commission 1978:59).

The threat posed by the negatively publicity was not seen the same way by local funeral directors. A 1964 survey found that only 25% of NFDA funeral directors reported any reaction to the negative publicity from their customers, community, families. Any at all. Of those who did, the reaction was mostly supportive and sympathetic. As for the cremation menace (particularly the direct cremation companies and memorial societies), most respondents weren't affected. Only 12% had memorial societies or direct cremation firms in their local communities (Taylor 2011:114-115).

According to the Federal Trade Commission, it was against this background that the grief counseling role:

appears to have been adopted and espoused by the NFDA not only as further effort to enhance the funeral director's occupational status by emphasizing service of a quasi-professional nature and implying some type of expertise, but also as a seemingly plausible justification for the sale of expensive services and merchandise that are part of a "traditional funeral" (1978:59-60).

Throughout this period, the NFDA continued to fight the growth of cremation, according to the Bureau of Consumer Protection "by use of any means possible." It invested millions of dollars in lobbying efforts, public information campaigns, commissioning reports to advance their position that the traditional funeral, in other words, trading on its professional authority as grief experts to limit the competition from cremation. And despite this, in 1963, the Catholic Church lifts its ban on

cremation. In the decade following Mitford's book and the Church's reversal of its cremation ban, cremation rates increased steadily. The real spike, however, happened in the 1970s - when cremation more than doubled - from 4.5% to 10%.

Historians draw a fairly direct line between Mitford, the FTC and the rise in cremation. Laderman writes that, "Cremation catches fire, so to speak, after Mitford's book in 1963, which opened the crematory door for consumers disenchanted with the mythology emanating from the funeral industry"(2003:196). Prothero, echoing this sentiment notes that: "Thanks to Mitford, the memorial societies, and the FTC, burial and the "traditional American funeral" were losing the aesthetic high ground to cremation and memorial service" (Prothero 2002:180).

While it is true that Mitford's book, criticisms of the industry, bad publicity, the Church lifting its ban on cremation - all contributed to the rise of cremation, the line is less clear and direct. Each of these events emerged from and represented larger, more diffuse cultural dynamics. The Church's position on cremation, for example, was of many changes coming out of Vatican II, an attempt to catch up to the modern world - less formal, ritualistic - decreasing the distance between leadership and led. Cremation historian Prothero (2002) captures how these cultural changes impacted rituals.

Baby boomers,

ushered in a new era of American ritual life, embracing a new style of ritual, characterized by simplicity, spontaneity, informality, flexibility, improvisation, participation, and (above all) personalization...They devised new birth rites, new wedding rites, new divorce rites, and new death rites. In all those new rituals, lay people seized authority from medical, funerary, and religious experts (205).

The Cremation Association of North America offered nine explanations for the rise in cremation, but reading these considerations reveals that the reasons are a motley collection of thoughts, so much so that it is clear that attributing the rise of cremation to the Church, Mitford or even money,

is simplistic. The “considerations” include: environmental concerns, increasing life expectancy and education levels, diminishing religious restrictions, regional differences, ties to tradition, retirement migration, the increasing acceptability of cremation, and so on (CANA). In reality, the rise in cremation was not driven by a repudiation of the funeral industry - that makes the industry and the traditional funeral far too central to a whole number of things. But it still was a repudiation. It rejected their claim that the embalmed body was important. It pointed to the limits of the influence and power of their professional authority.

The funeral industry wanted to stop cremations. They tried to, but they couldn't. Or as the NFDA President told his members in 1983, “No force on earth could hold back the tide of reality” (Quoted in Taylor 2010:160). Once the reality began to sink in, according to funeral historian Gary Laderman, “Funeral directors once again saw the wisdom in taking a more progressive posture and warmly embracing consumer tastes” (2003:197). That said, funeral directors did not warmly embrace the consumer taste for cremation.

The accommodation to cremation

One cremation embracing funeral director characterized the two primary postures the industry took to cremation as “ostrich” and “big foot.” For most of the century, funeral directors took the ostrich approach - burying their heads in the sand and ignoring it - which, for decades, they could afford to do.

You cannot make cremation go away by pretending it doesn't exist. Funeral directors do not have the luxury of being able to turn back the clock. We cannot pretend that it is 1970... As cremation crept up, then boomed, the industry went “big foot” - trying to stomp out the problem.

I don't think efforts to suppress cremation (the “big foot” response) will be successful. I believe the best defense against cremation is an educated offense. I

suggest we elevate cremation. You read correctly. We need not fear it. Nor should we disparage it because it reduces our profits” (1990:7).

“Some of us [at the NFDA] may have been so preoccupied with the Federal Trade Commission in recent years that we have lost sight of our basic mission” ... With the hearings and investigation finally over, industry leaders returned to reflect on that mission. The result was a report -*Tradition in Transition* - a coming to terms with the new reality. The report focused on accommodation, conceding to cremation. Funeral service could no longer "be against cremation as a procedure or process in final disposition. Rather, those in funeral service should be for post-death rites and ceremonies which have meaning and value to the survivors, no matter what the form of final disposition is" (quoted in Taylor 2001:160). Advising its members to be "for post-death rites" was short of a call to arms. As advice on how to deal with cremation, it was remarkably vague.

In his 1990 industry best seller, *Cremation and the Funeral Director*, Michael Kubasak came to the rescue with a more emphatic call to arms and detailed advice to funeral directors faced with the new cremation reality. As a California funeral director on the front line of the cremation boom, Kubasak told fellow funeral directors what they could expect. Cremation was no longer just a coastal, elite phenomenon. It was coming to your funeral home too.

Cremation threatened their professional claim. It also exposed cracks in the facade of their decades long defense. Maybe the critics were right: their professional claim, their grief expert opinion that the embalmed body was psychologically critical, was just a ruse for money making. They don't really object to cremation on some moral, principled grounds about therapeutic value. "Cremation is not the problem. The media is not the problem. The Federal Trade Commission is not the problem." The problem was the negative attitude funeral directors had towards cremation. "I wonder," wrote

Kubasak, "how attitudes within our profession would change if similar profit margins could be maintained with cremation?" (Kubasak 1990:2)

This is an important question, one that gets at the heart of the matter. Was the industry's objection to - their negative attitudes towards - cremation based on principles derived from their expertise (as they'd been arguing)? Or was the funeral industry's negative attitude really about profit margins (as the agencies had argued)? That was the case the federal agencies made.

Kubasak managed to change his own negative attitude. It was "not easy." How did he do it? He found opportunities... to profit.. He assured funeral directors that they could do the same. "Let us, together with funeral service manufacturers, suppliers and their employees develop new, meaningful and professional cremation products and ceremonies. Elevate cremation." Kubasak laid out the new approach:

Profits that we have become accustomed to cannot interfere with opportunities cremation presents to funeral service. To insure your role as a funeral director in the year two thousand you must open your mind to [the cremation] opportunity. When you hear someone wants cremation [do not assume they mean] "no ceremony, no casket, no container, no viewing, no embalming. (1990:3,33).

Nor does cremation necessarily mean an inexpensive funeral! In other words, there was a way for funeral directors to maintain both their profits *and* their professional claim. They needed to convince the public that viewing the body was, in and of itself, important. They could embalm the body and burn it too. This profit (and professionalism) saving workaround is "cremation with ceremony." Cremation didn't need to be a problem - as long as it wasn't *direct* cremation. Direct cremation, wrote the Consumer Protection Agency, "reduces the range of merchandise and services which can be sold, presents a cheaper method of disposition than the traditional funeral" which explained the industry's "apprehension" of the "growth in popularity of cremations," their opposition to and

harassment of cremation advocates (1975:95). And through the 1980s, most cremation was direct cremation. In 1985, for example, when the cremation rate was at 14%, over 85% of cremation cases were direct (Kubasek 1990). Funeral directors needed to reposition themselves to keep the cremation client, their own expertise, and their profits.

But wait, they can keep their own belief in the professionalism too! Kubasak was not abandoning the expert opinion that the embalmed body was therapeutic. He does something else here - almost hedging accusations of pure profiteering, appealing to the therapeutic, professional commitment impulse. "We can tolerate the loss of a casket purchase. But it is difficult to live with the feeling that a family has deprived itself of the therapeutic effects of the funeral ceremony because of a misconception about cremation" (Kubasak 1990:92). In the early 1980s, 80% of his cremation cases were direct. By the end of the decade, it was clear his strategy was working. Though he couldn't slow his cremation rate (it nearly doubled), he drastically reduced the direct cremations, and increased the number of caskets he sold to burn. By 1989, over 70% of his cremation cases included a casket purchase and funeral! To keep that profit (and soul) crushing direct cremation at bay, funeral directors needed to evangelize, spread the word, educate the public on "cremation with ceremony."

"Make money the modern way. Urn it!" - advertisement in The Director.

Two decades later, funeral directors were still taking pages from Kubasak's playbook. Funeral director conventions provide a particular window into the industry. First, a caveat: conventions are an easy target - sometimes the window is more like a funhouse mirror.. They provide some of the richest fodder for mocking the funeral industry. They are also the easiest access point for those who want to write about the industry "from the inside" – including Mitford - who gets some of her most

ridiculous quotes from convention presentations. Academics, too, have inventoried the convention expo as evidence of the hyper commercialization and "decline of civilization in late capitalism." For almost any given industry, conventions offer a particular – and in the case of the product expo, entirely commercialized and often absurd – window on an industry.

That said, industry conventions are a place where the issues facing the industry are addressed by industry leaders and local funeral directors. A perennial topic is how to deal with cremation. Even when it is not the direct subject of a session, it's there somewhere. Cremation is, by far, the most menacing threat to the industry.

I first came across Kubasak's work at a NFDA convention in Las Vegas. Justin Zabor, (CFSP), a third generation Ohio funeral director opened his session with a declaration: "We've been notoriously bad at adapting to cremation." This was in 2007. The industry had been "facing the reality" of cremation for decades. But still, they were adapting.

Justin Zabor took an usually poetic approach to his session "The Cremation of Sam McGee: The Profile of the Modern Cremation Consumer." *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, a poem by Robert Service, tells the tale of an Arctic explorer who makes his partner promise to cremate him because he doesn't like being cold. The partner, strong armed into cremating McGee - even through it's repugnant to him, even though the reason behind the request makes no sense, is the funeral director's perspective. Or as Zabor put it: "We don't necessarily agree with the consumer, but it doesn't matter." This is a guiding principle for his approach to funeral directing. From his website: "The customer is NOT always right - (but the customer is always in charge.)"

Funeral directors need to "give customers what they want. They will tell you what this is." His customers, particularly his baby boomer customers, tell him they want "creative memorial products." "Baby boomers are redefining the value in funeral service. They want quality at a reasonable cost. They want variety - choices, personalization. And they have a "Wal-Mart" sensibility - one stop shopping and no loyalty." Industry analysts describe personalization as funeral directing's primary "growth area," and, like Mr. March, credit baby boomers for driving this trend. "Baby boomers are asking for innovative ways to personalize funeral or memorial services" they want services "tailored to personal tastes... and themed services, theater-like sets, props, photos, and special effects."

Conventions, particularly the convention expos, are playgrounds of personalization products. Thomas Long, a theology professor, made a pilgrimage to a funeral director convention and took to the op-ed pages of *The New York Times* to make sense of the new trends. He described the personalization products, or the "new baubles and gewgaws of the funeral business" as a "wild blossoming of unconventional mortuary merchandise" (Long 2009).

One 2012 session "The Grand finale: effective funeral event planning," like many other sessions, was really about how to solve the cremation problem. Jerri Reed, CMP, CPC, welcomed her audience with a dire prediction projected on the screen: "Over 50% of your cases will be cremation!" The second slide, in big, bold letters: "ARE YOU READY? Can you supplement for 50% of your revenue? Do you have alternative services that will generate 50%?" The answer needs to be: event planning. According to Jerri Reed, "If we don't do event planning, we're not going to make it." Reed said "to the outside world, the funeral director and the event planner are the same."

Reed priced out two cremation scenarios - one as a funeral director, the other as event planner. Cremation by funeral director? \$2500. Cremation as event planner? \$15,000. There were murmurs of disbelief from the audience. One incredulous funeral director challenged Reed about the possibility of a \$15,000 event - even a “complete” so called “celebration of life service” (her average funeral cost was a mere \$3500), Reed assured her it was possible. "It could be three times more than that. And that is love."

The main solution to the cremation problem, the main thrust of this whole seminar, was that funeral directors need to be event planners. The majority of Reed’s revenue replacing strategies involved food and catering - and therefore were options unavailable to New York funeral directors.

Let’s return to Justin Zabor’s cremation session. His first solution to the cremation problem was personalization. The rest of the seminar was, like Ms. Reed’s, devoted to event planning. "We are planning events." Funeral directors need to give customers what they value. They’ll tell you what that is. Most often, it’s a party. According to Zabor, “Providing food is the new visitation.” Food at the funeral home, though illegal in the state of New York, is a major growth area in the rest of the country.

Jerri Reed showed slides of how she was able to transform her visitation rooms from wake space to catering space - before pictures complete with caskets and corpses, after pictures complete banquet room. Zabor took it to the next level. He converted his grandparents’ house, next door to the funeral home, into a catering facility. More than half of his yearly cases have their funeral events catered at his grandparents’ house. During the Q&A portion of this cremation seminar, there were no questions about cremation; they were about the catering hall. “Do they need a special license?”

No, they don't make the food themselves, so they don't need license to serve food. "What about a liquor license?" Nope, they encourage the family to bring any alcohol they might want, so they don't need a liquor license. Someone suggests renting out the extra bedrooms in the house for viewings, mostly so he can call it a "Dead and Breakfast." The audience loved this.

Headliner Alan Wolfelt, PhD. Wolfelt brings it all together - personalization and event planning as "experiences". As I entered his seminar, one funeral director told me he was "the Michael Jordan of grief counseling". While his expertise may have been grief counseling, his convention headlining session was "a 90-minute journey into dynamic customer service!" (Worth 1.5 CEUs!) He explained customer centered models, keys to the future (focus, flexibility, responsiveness!), and the importance of a value -added service culture. "We [funeral directors] like ceremony, but the public finds it less important."

Dr. Wolfelt worked in and expanded on, this industry applause line. "Visitation without the body is like a wedding without the bride. There is the acknowledgment of reality in the sight of the body." The memorial service [without the body present] makes much of dealing with memories of the dead by steadfastly refusing to deal with the dead themselves. It is the emotional and commemorative equivalent of a baptism without the baby or a wedding without the blushing bride or a graduation without the graduates." The audience cheered.

He argues that the funeral industry needs to understand that it is now a service based industry. People are willing to pay for experiences, memorable events. He offers the example of kid's birthday parties - they used to be simple, home affairs - now they're all going to Chuck E. Cheese. Funeral directors also need a different approach when talking about their services. He gave the example of

his "academic friends" who "don't know what a church looks like" and are scared of the word "eulogy." He tricks them with semantics – talks about "sharing memories" instead.

"Direct cremation families find the term funeral to be very negative, and they will not buy one. Successful funeral directors (who are now successfully handling cremation) do not even mention the word funeral in the arrangement conference." Funeral can be a "charged" word... the word ceremony is more acceptable to cremation people. It is simple and easily understood. It is not complicating. At worst, it is neutral. The word ceremony does not cause people to shudder or become defensive" (Kubasak 1990:93).

In the words of Cody Shawn, Certified Funeral Directing Professional, "Gone are the days when families would sit down and say, "Take care of me." Now families are coming in much more quote unquote educated". His session "Are you an undertaker or an order-taker?" gave funeral directors advice on "how to keep the expert card. Don't pass it across the table at the start of the arrangement." "Keeping the expert card" is the driving mission of Jacklyn Taylor, PhD. She frames it as regaining professional authority. During my fieldwork, many industry leaders pointed me to her work. She is a strong believer in the underutilized potential of the funeral industry's professional authority to "stem the tide of cremation and bodiless memorials." She dismisses those who explain the rise in cremation by way of broad cultural changes (which is most people). According to Taylor, "Sociological and psychological explanations are merely reasons that citizens might misunderstand the importance of funeral. They do not explain the reaction of funeral directors nor why they have not been more successful in intervening in the decline of funerals"(2011:13).

The evidence suggests their “cremation with ceremony” strategy isn’t working out so well. According to Taylor, cremation remains a problem for funeral directors because “for all intents and purposes, “cremation” in the United States means that no traditional funeral with the body present occurs” (2011:24). Recent data is scarce. Taylor cites a 2004 study which reports that the majority of clients selecting cremation are not having a ceremony that involves a funeral director. This, by the way, is “because of a lack of understanding on the part of citizens,” which is *really* the “failure” of funeral directors to exercise their cultural authority.

But here is the thing: the FTC diminished the autonomy of the industry, but it had little impact on the cost of funerals, the bottom lines for individual funeral directors.

Variation

There is no doubt that cremation and the related personalization of funerals into fun events are threats to the viability of the industry and to status of funeral directors. But not the only ones. The industry storyline focuses too much on the upper middle class, largely white, baby boomer groups whose voices are typically overrepresented. By focusing on the move to memorials primarily occurring among the upper and middle classes, it overlooks difference in funeral practice by class, race, ethnicity. It largely ignores place specificity, the fact that funeral homes are spatially, community, neighborhood located.

There’s no shortage of funeral related research. There is, however, very little about class differences. “Little research in the various literatures of death and dying has focused on the two most fundamental components of all cultural expression, time and space” (McIlwain 2003:3). Sociologist Glenny Howarth realized this during research for her 1996 ethnography of London funeral homes.

Her field work “alerted” her “to the radical differences between the funeral practices of the middle and working classes.” She describes a “rare example of sociological research that aimed to examine and clarify social class variations in funeral preferences.” This rare example was published in the *The American Sociological Review* in 1950! Her research brought her to “question some of the critiques of the funeral industry... and concluded that these contemporary funeral reformers had little knowledge of, or interest in, the funeral rituals of working class people” (2007:428).

And there is a lot of variation. Here’s some of what we do know about group differences in funeral practices. Upper and middle class whites are more likely to be cremated, have memorials, and generally less expensive funerals. Cremation is least common among blacks - both native and immigrant. Poor people pay more for funerals. Those are the broadest and most consistently agreed upon patterns. The differences in funeral practice- by race, class, neighborhood - are conspicuous on the ground. The threats to individual funeral directors, neighborhood funeral homes are also different than those faced by the industry. And some cases, the threats - and benefits - stem from these neighborhood, race and class based differences in funeral environments.

It is these issues that I take up in more detail in the Chapters which follow.

CHAPTER TWO

Status & Stigma among Funeral Directors

The industry put forth two claims for professional recognition, explicitly linking professional recognition to status. This chapter reexamines the industry claims from the perspective of funeral directors and the challenges both the industry and directors themselves faced supporting these claims. From this viewpoint, we begin to see the limits of a profession wide case for status, instead there's the complexity of experience at the local and individual levels. Glamor and calling are types of status claims, the industry has mixed feelings about them, but we see signs encouraging one, discouraging the other. There's an ambivalence about both among funeral directors too. It was in interviews that I first thought about these as related to/ parallel to, reminiscent of the explicit, intentional, strategic, simplistic claims made by the industry.

The first claim: embalming is the professional skill

The original claim, that embalming is a defining, status elevating particularized skill of funeral directing - has faded from the industry's rhetoric. The industry's strongest case for the value of embalming (that it was critical to public health and safety) was solidly debunked by scientists. And skewered in the FTC hearings and final report - "the scientific aura provided the principal basis for the funeral director's claim to "professional" status...Still today, [embalming] provides the opportunity for an embalmer to showcase his talent and skill" (FTC 1978:188). There's something to this. *It* remains alive in the training, and, I found, in the self-image of some funeral directors. It's reflected not only in the curriculum, but also in the way funeral directors talk about their training long after graduation.

Embalming... by the books

Embalming, “really [the] professional facet of the vocation” is “the reason for much of our professional education” according to the classic mortuary textbook by Frederick and Strub (1967:41). Over the decades, the curriculum has expanded to include courses on everything from marketing and business management to the sociology of funeral homes. Embalming, however, remains a central focus (FTC 1978, Cahill 1999, Sanders 2010). It is often the first subject taught, and, judging from interviews, the most memorable. It is the coursework on embalming that funeral directors talk about the most.

Funeral director training generally requires an associates degree in funeral service, passing the state and national licensing, then serving a 1-3 year internship. There are fifty nine accredited mortuary programs in the US. The most famous is in New York. Mortuary schools have high drop out rates. The American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service (“McAllister), the “Harvard of mortuary schools” has a historically (now controversially) high pass rate for the licensing exam. Most New York City funeral directors graduated from McAllister.

Even they bring up the high drop out rates. According to one McAllister alum, “By graduation, “you lose about half the class. They drop it, don't make it.” And the reason they “don't make it” is because the program is so intense. "It's not an easy course. You're following in essence a medical course. The beginnings of what any person going into a medical profession would know. Marie, his co-worker, agreed:

Exactly, they don't make it. They don't realize the coursework. There's college chemistry one and two, anatomy one and two. And “anatomy for embalmers” is like a class you would get at medical school. The coursework is very difficult and they can't get through it. You lose about half of them. We started out with 180 some odd students; we only graduated about 90. That's how difficult it was.

Funeral directors often compared their training to that of nursing and medical students with emphasis on the fact that funereal directors only get one year to do it. Ella Garwood trained in Chicago, met her husband at a funeral directors convention, then moved to Fort Greene Brooklyn where they opened the Garwood Funeral home in the 1970s. The program, two blocks from the Cook County Hospital Medical school, was "very, very, intense. We had the same courses that the medical students had, only they had two years to do them. We had one year to do them." William in the Bronx: "Most of the students in our classes were nursing students. They's from the two-year program for nursing. So all the science classes, the chemistry, anatomy, biology classes, it was mixed with nursing and mortuary science students. The curriculum was the same." Garwood, like others, said medical students regularly partnered with mortuary students to study. Because mortuary students had such a compressed curriculum, they were excellent study partners and tutors for those in the more relaxed programs of nursing or medicine.

By all accounts, a one year program makes for an intense year. LC Willis insisted that I could not possibly imagine just how intense it was. "The third quarter, I'm in the bathroom with the other students, and we were just like, "Why?? Why? We can't do this! It's impossible! Restorative art, micro, biology, chemistry, pathology, embalming, mortuary law!" Most cited the coursework learning about the body - anatomy, physiology, biology, pathology - as the most difficult parts of the curriculum. "We had to trace blood from the head to the toes. And then you had to know every artery, every vein. It was unbelievable."

Embalming:... by the Body

The coursework related to embalming - with all its memorization - was one challenge; the hands-on work of embalming was another. For many, the first time they see a cadaver is the first day of their

practicum. Antonio Madera's class had a softer entry. Before cutting into the corpses themselves, they took a field trip to the local morgue to observe autopsies. Observation was more than some could handle. Said Madera, "Plenty of guys hit the floor when they saw that first cut. Boom! Boom!" They passed out. "They couldn't stand the blood. So they were out. We started with 75 and only 20 graduated in the academy." The first practical session in mortuary school is a kind of moment of truth, reckoning; it weeds out students who were just in it for the money or the glamor. It also reinforces the importance of embalming to funeral directing. "If students cannot accept the sights, sounds, and feel of embalming they are "weeded out" because they are presumed to lack a gift, or call, for the art of embalming and, by proxy, funeral directing more generally" (Sanders 2010:55).

Others, like Avery Thomas of the South Bronx, actively enjoyed embalming - and take to it immediately. It was the body that drew Avery to funeral directing in the first place. Faced with her first hands on lesson, she was ecstatic:

It was great! It was like everything just came together! I'm loving it! I love the body! It's like a well-oiled machine. Everything's in place and everything's in place for something else. Like your ribs cover your heart and things like that. I'm like, "Oh my God!"

Fainting at the first sight of a corpse does not guarantee failure as a funeral director. At Garozzos, for example, Steve, the managing funeral director described his first encounter at the morgue - and it did not go well. "The sight of a dead body, the *smells!* It was too much. [He] almost passed out!" Thirty years later, embalming is the best part of his job. For Steve, it was less an active appreciation of embalming than an reactive aversion to the social side.

The visibility and invisibility of embalming as a skill

In interviews, funeral directors spoke freely and extensively about embalming... in the context of mortuary school. They were detailed, descriptive; they talked about emotions, personal reactions.

When it came to workplace experience, on the other hand, they spoke reluctantly, vaguely, and with decidedly more caution, reserve, and clinical detachment.

This reluctance is a both a sensitivity to the stigma, and, argues Cahill, part of their direct training. The language they use and learn in mortuary school, he says, serves two purposes. The first is to “persuade students that they are becoming scientifically informed and trained professionals comparable to physicians” (Cahill 1995:127). The second purpose is to provide funeral directors with the language they should use with the public - to decontaminate the work, sanitize it, make it sound both familiar and medical. Funeral directors, “understandably emphasize the sanitary aspects of embalming with reluctant customers. [This emphasis] is also self-serving, for the industry's long-standing drive to achieve "professional" status has been predicated on these scientific claims” (1978:276). Therefore, I was not surprised that funeral directors were either reluctant to discuss the details of embalming, or did so with clinical detachment.

Cahill notes predicament funeral directors are in when it comes to public evaluation of embalming. “They could not publicly tout their occupationally distinctive and technically impressive embalming skills in any detail without implying a certain callousness and contamination” (Cahill 1995: 125-6). Not only can they not “tout” their skills, but also many actively avoid the subject of embalming altogether. When, for example, the FTC ruled that funeral directors must get explicit permission from families before embalming a body, funeral directors argued that "the subject of embalming is repulsive to people [one characterized the process as “shocking” and “frightful”] and therefore it would be offensive to ask a family about embalming”(1978:222).

Nearly every interviewee reported that the most challenging and/or time intensive was embalming an autopsied body - commonly referred to as a “full post”. The clinical text book six point description did little to prepare me. Working with the body was Avery’s favorite part of the job, she explained the full post with no such clinical detachment. Avery gave a vivid, colorful, explanation.

It's been cut wide open including the head. So, you can see the brains, you get to see the kidneys, the liver, the intestines--the intestines are very very loong. You can see everything! They take all the inside organs out and put it into what's called an autopsy bag--it's a big plastic bag, they put all your organs including the brains.... We have to un-staple them [the body], pull all the organs out, put it in a pail, and we put some fluid on them. Once you take all that out you have a big empty cavity. What we do is we take all the organs, we lay it down like--I hate to say it-- but, like you're layering a cake. And then you take the embalming fluid and you sprinkle it over and then you take some more and you layer it down. You even it out, and then you put some more embalming fluid. And once you get everything in there, then you put the ribcage back on and then you stop to sew up.

Avery was one of four funeral directors at Armstrongs in the South Bronx - but she did all of their embalming work. In our first interview, she invited me to come watch her embalm “anytime.” I received more invitations to “stay” at funeral homes than I anticipated, but Avery was one of the few who explicitly offered me access to the embalming room.

The laws about observing embalmings are ambiguous. Funeral researchers regularly report “regulations” that kept them from observing the embalming process. Jessica Mitford, eager to observe, found that only licensed funeral directors are permitted, “all others, except apprentices, are usually barred by law from the preparation room” (1963:44). In his mortuary school field work, Spencer Cahill, likewise found himself unable to observe embalmings. According to Cahill, “State law prohibited anyone except licensed apprentices and fully licensed funeral directors registered mortuary sciences students and members... from witnessing an embalming much less participating” (1999:103).

In New York, I heard murmurings that it would be “illegal” for a non-funeral director to observe and embalming - or at least, “not allowed.” I never found such a law. Therefore, I spent hundreds of hours in prep rooms. I did not, however, choose to participate when invited to “try my hand” with the scalpel myself, curious and tempted as I was.

The possibility of prep room access with Avery was one of the many reasons I chose Armstrongs as a field site. I wanted to see Avery, who was so enthusiastic about the body, in her element. But I found myself barred from the prep room. Not by law, but by Ace. Ace, a co-owner of Armstrongs, surprised Avery by agreeing to my field work (He’s a tough nut to crack, she told me). He had one stipulation: no embalmings. His ruling had nothing to do with a law. He was not a licensed funeral director but spent time (doing what, who knows) in the prep room. His concern wasn’t with the law, it was a concern about “germs and stuff” Avery explained apologetically. Pleasantly surprised Ace agreed at all, I was only mildly disappointed. With time, I understood the ruling to be about exerting his power more than any concern for my health.

While I never got to see Avery herself at work, her description prepared me for the many full-posts I would see. The fact that they inject embalming fluid into six points was the least memorable. I might otherwise have been surprised, even shocked, when the unstapled abdominal cavity revealed a garbage bag instead of organs. Avery’s description also attuned me to critical differences in approaches. One in particular spoke to Avery’s diligence and care in the embalming room: most embalmers I observed did not “layer the cake” - that is, carefully replace each individual organ into the abdominal cavity. Instead, the organs stayed in the bag. He⁹ would pour embalming fluid into

⁹ I observed seven different embalmers. They were all male.

the bag, add some embalming powder, and reseal the bag. At the end of the embalming, he would then deposit the bag, in tact, into the body before sewing it closed. Over hundreds of hours, I never saw organs returned to their places.

Garozzos funeral home, one of the field sites, is among the busiest in New York City. On my first visit, they were quick to tell me that they, unlike many funeral homes, did all of their embalming “in house.” At nearly 500 cases per year, that was a lot of embalming for a single facility never mind the reality - that a single funeral director, Howard Casey, did almost all of them. When I approached Garozzos for participant observation, I had no expectations of access. It was there, however, that I had unfettered access to the dozens of embalmings happening at Garozzos each week, as many as five in a day.

When I was observing, most funeral directors narrated at least parts the procedure to me, ask if I had questions, some even tested me on what I knew. Like Avery, they seemed to appreciate the interest, attention, curiosity and were eager to talk about it. It was an opportunity to share their particular knowledge with an outsider, a skill they have worked to develop, but, because of its “dirtiness,” they don’t get to share often.

Howard, however, was not a talker. Garozzos was filled with large personalities, loud talking, testosterone, male swagger, chauvinism. Howard was an exceptional presence - he was not only soft-spoken, but pimpled, awkward, overweight, and gay and, to my surprise, totally respected at Garozzos.¹⁰ He countenanced me as an audience, answered questions, but never offered

¹⁰ He spoke less, was more reasonable. So there were things about the dynamic and his personality that could “rise above” the noise there. But I really believe it was his skill. I don’t think “reasonable-ness’ alone was going to overcome his social handicaps in this really really, really macho, sexist and aggressive environment.

explanations, never narrated his work. Maybe he didn't use me as an audience or opportunity to show his skill - because he, unlike many embalmers, already had people who appreciated his work. He did get respect for his skill - at least from those within the industry. He had a reputation - inside the funeral home and among other funeral homes and agencies - as a skilled embalmer. Howard never bragged. Early on, he mentioned did 95% of the embalming at Garozzos - which I easily understood as an enormous workload - but not much beyond that. I learned about his skill by watching him and listening to others. The funeral directors at Garozzos were proud of him and bragged about his embalming- his speed, mostly. Had I ever seen anyone embalm faster than Howard? They asked. I hadn't.

Though generally reluctant to discuss embalming in interviews, they regularly differentiated between the "full post" and "normal" cases. The comfortable, discussable difference: a full post takes significantly more time - I heard reports from three to 24 hours.¹¹ Howard did it in 45 minutes.

Beyond the speed, there were particularly challenging cases that Howard could do. The full post was the first go-to example of a challenging case, but interviewees also reported rare and unusual cases - "floaters" or decapitation - as hypotheticals. These were cases most funeral directors had not seen or done themselves. There were no floaters or decapitations during my time with Howard, but Howard had a case no one ever mentioned, not even in the specialized, special cases embalming CEUS: bone donation. From observation, this bone (and skin) donation appeared to be among the most challenging cases. They are pretty rare. A bone donation is what it sounds like, so maybe I shouldn't have been so surprised to see the body: a body without bones has no shape, it's nearly flat. It was

¹¹ Avery, for example, would give a full post 24 hours "to drain."

startling.¹² This was going to be an open casket viewing. The donor, a 19-year-old Haitian male, died of a gunshot wound. Gunshot victims - often otherwise young and healthy - are among the best candidates for donation. Howard rebuilt the body, gave it back its shape, with PVC piping. Embalmers receive additional money for these cases - (\$450 in this case). The money and the specialized supplies - come from the donation agency. I don't know if Howard got the job as freelance (i.e. the agency knew he could handle it) or if it was just another Garozzos job. Within the industry, donor bodies are recognized as skilled work - evidenced, in part, by the additional charge paid by the agencies. But, the family never saw the body without the bones.

Joe was the "other" embalmer at Garozzos. A new addition in my time there, he was hired, in part, to lighten Howard's embalming load. (There were three other full time funeral directors on staff, all trained in embalming.) Joe is a confident, competent embalmer - and enjoys it. But he received little, if any, of the respect given to Howard.

Joe's enthusiasm and pride in his work was evident in the embalming room. As Joe narrated the "purse" suture he was using to close the hold left by a Foley catheter, I asked how it was different from the "box" stitch. When he looked surprised, I explained that I'd been to numerous embalming continuing education classes. Had I ever seen Jack Adams? He wanted to know. I had - *twice* that summer alone. Jack Adams, "one of the world's foremost embalming authorities," is a regular headliner on the funeral director convention circuit.

¹² It was actually bone AND skin donation. A body without skin is also startling, but less complicated for the embalming than expected. They only take the skin (maybe in light of the open casket) from non-visible places. So it doesn't need to be replaced, just treated.

Jack Adams represents another level of respect and expertise. Joe was star struck. He marveled at his artistry and skill. "He's a genius. People pay to fly him to their funeral homes to do bodies. I could never do some of the stuff he does." Joe recounted excitedly and in detail the cases from the presentation - the same cases I'd seen twice that summer. Joe was a pretty confident and competent embalmer, but knew his limits. "I can do some stuff," he said, "but not that." He just doesn't "have that kind of artistic talent." He kept copies of Jack Adams slides and used some of the things he learned including one that I learned from Jack Adams - the pillow test and the box stitch "answer."

Jack Adams is best known within the industry for his work on extraordinary cases (not common problems like swollen necks.¹³) What I found most remarkable about his presentation, however, was his illustration of the tensions between visibility, invisibility and skill. His slideshow focused on extreme cases - facial reconstruction, decapitation, etc. In such cases, his skill as an embalmer was at least visible with the before and after slides. But, to "outsiders?" It depends if the family saw the late stages. In most cases, in "ordinary" cases, a lack of skills, that is, mistakes, are clear. Jack Adams offered two lessons that illustrate this tension - the invisibility of the skill and the visibility of mistakes - or lack of skill.

¹³ The neck is one of these commonly overlooked details. The neck, said Adams, too often looks "bulky, swollen, and shapeless" in the casket. This is one of the few things about the embalmed body that I, as an outsider, as a funeral attender, have noticed. The shapelessness of the neck happens in the transition from embalming table to casket. While embalming, the head is propped on a head block - allowing gravity to work on loose skin. In the casket, however, the body is laid flat, the meager satin pillow barely lifting the head, the loose skin now gathered back at the neck. There's a simple solution to this: the pillow test. Before moving the body, take it off the head block and test it on something pillow height. Catch the shapelessness on the embalming table where it can be fixed. In most cases, the fix will be collecting the extra skin behind the neck and securing it with a "box stitch".

Lesson 1: New Bodies require more skill

Embalming has to change because death has changed. People are living longer than ever before - at the expense of their bodies. These “new bodies” that arrive in funeral homes are not only older, but in worse physical condition - emaciation, edema, radiation - the ravages of extensive hospital stays and medical interventions. The work of the embalmer is more of a challenge. While funeral directors often joke about how family members bring wedding photos from 50 years ago when the embalmer asks for a picture to work off of - this is a similar but less lighthearted version. According to Jack Adams, "New people are living longer and its getting harder to make them recognizable... Funeral directors can't do it the way grandpa did. The normal case has disappeared." Most of the bodies coming in to the funeral home require what, in the past, would have been considered if not extraordinary, then at least extra work.

In the case of new bodies, then, the work of the embalmer is getting more difficult, requires more skill, but this is no more visible to outsiders. Often the family and friends who will attend the funeral, in most cases, did not see the deceased in the final stages of medical interventions (given our response to disease and dying, which is some combination of privacy and discomfort/ aversion). In the case of bone donation, for example, the transformation from a flat, shapeless corpse to the rebuilt, presentable body, required time, practice, arguably even artistry. Within the industry, donor bodies are recognized as skilled work - evidenced, in part, by the additional charge paid by the agencies. But, the family never saw the body without the bones.

Howard is a case of getting status inside of the profession (Abbott's intraprofessional status via professional purity.) His peers, outside agencies even, respect him for his skill as an embalmer. He was not only fast, but able to handle the unusual and challenging cases. This is the Jack Adams

situation too - professional status as professional purity. Jack Adams only handles the most complex of embalming cases. Howard is also getting this respect as a funeral director (primarily as an embalmer) despite the fact that they say he is terrible at the social side of funeral directing. Howard has “no social skills” and Steve “wouldn’t have him do the arrangements for his dog.”¹⁴

Or maybe in part because he is terrible at the social side. This could also be a version of Abbott’s professional purity as the work distilled of the human messiness, the “human complexity.” There is no way to remove the human complexity from the social side of funeral directing. There’s no intraprofessional status given to the funeral director who is good with families - good at the social side. In interactions among funeral directors, I would say there is more respect, admiration, praise for the funeral director that is good at the physical/ technical side. They might acknowledge that someone is a good director, good with families, at sales - good at all the social aspects. But no one ever bragged about it.

The professional purity is really the only kind of status that may be available to skilled embalmers. The public, according to Abbott, gives status to those who can “order the disordered,” a charismatic status. At one time, perhaps, the embalmer had this kind of status - the miracle of Abe Lincoln’s funeral, the transformation of the illness ravaged body to a peacefully sleeping one. But changes in our contact, familiarity with death, our closeness with family - proximity, but also physicality - make the “transformation” of the dead body to this sleeping body, less amazing. With greater distance

¹⁴ Howard started as a resident (requirement for licensing) as a favor. Someone connected to Tony said, “you need to give this guy a job.” When I asked why they kept him on, Steve said, he’s a good guy. He didn’t talk for the first year but he could just tell he was a good guy. “You just can’t let him talk to a family. I have to tell him all the time, “Leave that snippy fag attitude at the door.” I wouldn’t have him do the arrangements for my dog. He just can’t deal with people.”

from death, the institutionalization of illness, fewer people know what a dying - or dead - body looks like.

Clarence Glover is a crusader out to reclaim the professional respect for embalming. I first encountered Clarence in Las Vegas at the annual NFDA convention. Midway through his seminar, "Alternative solutions to common embalming problems," he stopped, turned to his assistant on the power point, and announced, "Put that thing on pause. Uncle Clarence needs to preach!"

And Uncle Clarence preached:

The only thing going for us is that we embalm. Did you hear that? They can go to Hertz rent-a-car! They don't need you to fill out the death certificate. They don't need you to call the priest. They don't need you to coordinate their cemeteries.¹⁵ So why do they need you? There is another wave coming out – instructing people how to take care of the dead at home. Dry ice. Where to get a casket. Do it all at home! And save thousands. Never let anyone define your professionalism for you. When they come in and say, "Brother Clarence, that's mamma' – I got 'em.

Clarence encouraged funeral directors to take on the challenging cases, showcase their skills, which is also to say - strongly encourage embalming.

DON'T BE LAZY and say nothing can be done, I suggest we close the casket. Everyone know how they died. Take the time to try. Then let the family be the ones to say "Well Mr. Glover, you've really done a good job and we appreciate all your efforts but I think well [sic] close the casket." On the other hand they just might say "I didn't think we'd be able to see her... where did she get hurt.... How did you do that?" All the while you're standing there grinning like a skunk eating hot grits, saying, "Thank you darling - we try hard." I cannot stress enough to "Take your time!" You're not God, you're just His son.

We can't really evaluate embalming skill. Funeral director-cum-sociologist describes the dilemma faced by embalmers. Embalmers "feel that it is important to make the deceased presentable, but that "the family wouldn't realize the difference between a masterpiece and a lousy job" (1975:115). This lack of recognition, according to Pine, has stunted the "professional culture of funeral directing"

¹⁵ In New York they do.

which has little incentive to “develop expert embalming and restorative specialists.” Funeral directors, unfortunately, lack the “professional visibility of physicians.” In his ethnographic work, Pine found this “problem is mentioned numerous times, for this lack of professional recognition is annoying to many of the funeral directors.” According to Pine, this problem has:

Another interesting ramification. [Because outsiders cannot appreciate the skill], the embalmer directs his expert work audience which is not professionally trained to judge such efforts. The bereaved family and the general public which comes to view the deceased make judgments about the practitioners work not based on standard competence established in the profession but rather from outside it (Pine 1975:116).

Lesson 2: No Leaking!
(*What does the visibility of mistakes say about skill?*)

Jack Adams was no preacher, but for lesson two, he approached Uncle Clarence’s exhortation levels:

The embalmed body must not leak! A lot of us take the leaking bodies, you put it in a unionall, now that’s full of fluid. You have to make sure your body is leak proof! All the lawsuits come from moisture. You gotta stop it! (Jack Adams, NYSFD convention)

Bodies leak. The main project of embalming is to dry it out. There are two parts to this. The first, and probably most familiar, is that the blood is drained from the body and replaced with embalming fluid - which dries it out. There is, however, more than blood in a body creating moisture. But there’s a lot more wet stuff than just blood in a body. The second part of drying a body is removing that other wet stuff - also known as aspirating. While the embalming fluid is working its way through the circulatory system, the funeral director takes a trocar attached to a suction pump (Avery helpfully provided the liposuction image for this) and punctures each of the organs, removing all of the wet contents. Of course, there’s no way to remove everything. Some moisture will remain. Enough moisture to leak? Not usually. But the unionall is usually there just in case. This is a plastic jumpsuit that, probably unbeknownst to most of us, is what the majority of people wear in their final resting place - underneath those carefully chosen burial clothes.

That most lawsuits come from leaking speaks to the visibility of this mistake. And it's a simple one - which also points to some simplicity of the embalming process.

Let's return to Clarence. Remember, Clarence is campaigning to restore respect to embalming, the key to funeral directors professionalism. His audience is funeral directors themselves and, as a regular on the convention circuit, not to mention as President of the NFDM&A, he's had a large platform. On the day I was in the audience, I could not help but think - as he preached the professionalism of embalming, he simultaneously was undermining his argument that it is this refined skill. Beyond the kitty litter and the Ovaltine (he's an outlier on bringing it that basic), he, like many funeral directors I've learned from, tipped their hat on the simplicity of the process with a resounding industry truism, one that seems to undermine their case for "skill". Sure, there may be complex arteries to memorize and a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes, but when it comes down to it, "You only have two things to show - a face and a pair of hands. You can cover a multitude of sins with clothes. But better get those hands and face right." Vanderlyn Pine, the sociology professor, is not so unlike Uncle Clarence. His research and writing was a different, quieter sort of campaign with a similar message: funeral directors can and should elevate their professional status, they are professionals, and embalming is key to that. As he made his case for embalming as the professional skill, he, like Clarence, concedes its simplicity: the "primary concern" is the face and hands(Pine 1975:116).

Paying for skill

According to Uncle Clarence, "Anyone charging \$150 for embalming should be slapped. You are a professional! You should be charging at least \$500-\$750."

But they don't.

Embalming is one of the least expensive parts of the funeral. At Garozzos, where the average funeral costs \$8,000, the charge for embalming is \$495. Funeral directors have not defended their skill in the marketplace. Jessica Mitford's missive and the Federal Trade Commission hearings lambasted the industry for overcharging. We're talking hundreds of hours of testimony, thousands of best selling words of outrage over the price of funerals. None of this outrage was directed at the cost of embalming itself. There was no attempt to regulate these costs - because there was no need.

Is Clarence right? Should they be slapped for failing to defend their skill in the marketplace? How could they have? And they probably can't. Why not?

Visibility is part of it.

They can't advertise it, they can't explain it... and more often than not, outsiders can't see it.

This status has limited transferability outside of the profession. Embalming skill is difficult to monetize. Unlike in many other fields, it's not the wealthy who want the expertise. Certainly, funerals are statements of status. Unlike many status symbols, conspicuous consumption is not the MO of the wealthy when it comes to funerals. Nor is it just "the poor pay more. Desire for an open casket and therefore, insistence on a skilled embalmer - theoretically at great costs (if we assume skill/ time required should increase the cost by a bunch) in cases of real deformity - isn't correlated strongly with income (though neither is willingness to pay for an expensive funeral).

The relationship between higher cost and higher status is far from linear. Early 20th century writers made a few observations about class differences in funeral consumption - consistent with wealth and extravagance translating to not only more expensive and elaborate funerals, but also to the delay in funerals. The cost of “watchers” forced the “thrifty poor to shorten the period between the death and burial of their dead... The social status of the bereaved family was largely estimated by the length of time they were able to hold out against the exactions of the watcher. According to Kephart, that’s about the extent of funeral class analysis until his writing in the 1950s. Whereupon he discovered that while historically “elegance after death” varied directly with class level, a role reversal was taking place” by the 1950s since “display for its own sake [was] possibly a dwindling upper class “after death” phenomenon (1950:636). And then he introduces an important caveat to the study:

Although the aim of the present study was to unearth possible class differences, it soon became apparent that religious, ethnic, and nationality differences were as great, if not greater, than class differences. It was thought advisable, however, to keep the original sample intact, and to restrict this first study to class differentials. In view of our present findings it is planned to make further studies of differentials pertaining to race, religion, and nationality (637).

Two features of the industry structure - the prevalence of trade embalmers and the cost of embalming - that suggest funeral directors understand the predicament they’re in. They may respect, appreciate, the skill of embalming, but outsiders do not.

Contrary to the predictions (or advice) of sociologists, funeral directors do not embrace embalming as their defining skill. In fact, many funeral directors do not do their own embalming, but rather have “trade embalmers” do it and deliver the body.

There's another "type" of embalmer, probably more common than the Howard type. They're colloquially known as "body guys." A body guy can be specifically trade embalmers - i.e. they freelance, aren't based out of a single funeral home, and only handle bodies. More often, body guy refers to a position within an organization. It's the funeral director on staff at a funeral home who primarily (or in some cases only) handles the bodies. Rarely, if ever, deals with families. Howard rarely dealt with families, but no one would call him a body guy. NFDA 1984 President speech: "All of you, and myself included, should get back down in that embalming room a little more often and not just turn that job off to the lowest man on your staff, but get involved because that's important work"(Quoted in Taylor 2012:117).

According to Hughes, the delegation of dirty work can elevate a profession. A problem with this is - customers don't know whether or not funeral directors are embalming or not - so it so it doesn't decontaminate them necessarily in the eyes of the public. And there's still the open question of whether or not the dirty work of embalming is of the kind Hughes describes as elevating. Is it charismatic? It might have been at one point. There's an ambivalence among those who trade out their work. The funeral homes that did their own embalming - like Garozzos and Armstrongs - were always quick to mention it in interviews. Those who "traded it out" had to be asked. At Cipollas, they went so far as to try to hide the fact that they traded it out.

According to Irving Goffman, the squeamishness and secrecy surrounding embalming forces undertakers to charge for something, well, more familiar, comfortable. Because of discomfort with embalming:

Undertakers must therefore charge a great deal for their highly visible product - a coffin that has been transformed into a casket - because many of the other costs of conducting a funeral are ones that cannot be readily dramatized"(1959:41-2).¹⁶

The economics of trade work says something about the evaluation of the skill - if we think of value and evaluation in terms of money. I'm not sure what to make of it - the information I get from both sides doesn't quite add up - suggesting a real uncertainty, ambivalence, inconsistency of evaluation. On the one hand, I've been told that trade work is the best money. Dupree, for example, described trade work as "the most lucrative work in the funeral business" - making up to \$100,000.

On the other hand (and from the other side of the business with which I was more familiar), it seems more cost effective to have someone else do it. For as low as \$150, a trade embalmer (who must be a licensed funeral director) will drive (their own car) to the hospital, fill out the paperwork, retrieve the body, transport the body somewhere to be embalmed, and deliver the embalmed body to the funeral home. The low cost of this, I think, undermines an argument for embalming as a "specialized skill." I think there are a couple of reasons why this has happened. I think two things can be true at the same time: funeral directors may respect embalming as a specialized skill, but they were never able to make the case to the public. The public doesn't see the skill therefore funeral

¹⁶ This strategy backfired a la mitford. But it also isn't a great explanation. Problems: Goffman is saying that we pay for dramatics - but I don't see how "transforming" a coffin into a casket (huh?) is more dramatic than the transformation of making someone dead look like they're sleeping. Isn't seeing the before and after sufficient dramatization? Do we buy the argument that callousness, or discomfort, is the reason why FDs for so long relied on casket costs? They were hiding costs by overcharging for caskets - but not sure I buy this explanation. I think families would be too uncomfortable to contest or discuss the cost of embalming - something that is harder to either evaluate - or stomach.. And would have more grounds to contest casket costs [wood, metal, at least somewhat familiar — so funeral directors could have charged more. Possible explanations: 1) power of the casket industry. The more I think about it, the more I realize they - more than the NFDA or any other single interest - run the funeral industry. 2) it tracks the failed professionalization project. For this, I would want to know how the relative costs have changed. The basic technology hasn't changed much since the 1900s, the chemicals keep improving, but this is not a real high innovation area.

directors can't charge for the skill. It's devalued in the marketplace, but funeral directors themselves of value it.

The second claim: embalming is for healing

For almost a century, the funeral industry staked their legitimacy on the science of embalming and sanitation claims. By the 1960s, the story changed. Gone from their rhetoric, even their job description, is any mention of science, embalming, or bodies. The NFDA “communication skills, compassion, a desire to comfort those coping with a death, as well as organizational and event-planning skills” (NFDA 2016). Jessica Mitford describes the evolution:

The two grounds chosen by the undertaking trade for defense of embalming embrace two objectives near and dear to the hearts of Americans: hygiene, and mental health. The theory that embalming is an essential hygienic measure has long been advanced by the funeral industry. A much newer concept, that embalming and restoring the deceased are necessary for the mental well-being of the survivors, is now being promoted by industry leaders; the observer who looks closely will discover a myth in the making here. “Grief therapy,” the official main bestowed by the undertaker on this aspect of their work, has long been a second line of defense for the embalmers (1963:56)

The healing power of seeing the embalmed body is a central tenet of the funeral industry, and a rationale for embalming. This central tenet of the industry is not without debate. As noted in Chapter One, there's little evidence of the psychological benefits of seeing the body (e.g. Sanders 2010; FTC 1978).

Memory picture
Ameliorating grief by providing an “aesthetically pleasing “memory picture” was the leading perspective for industry participants largely until the 1980s and 1990s” (Sanders 2010:51). The industry term “memory picture” - once used to describe the healing benefit of viewing the embalmed body - has largely disappeared from the discourse (official industry writings and interviews), but the idea behind it remains central. “Only a small minority of the trade now employs

that description but *nearly all agree* that they are in the business of making memories to at least some extent given their professional expectations”(Sanders 2009:466). (italics mine.) According to Mitford, “All funeral men” still clung to the belief that “the primary purpose of embalming, is a sanitary one, the disinfecting of the body so that is no longer a health menace,” only invoking “grief therapy” after the scientific debunking. In my experience, few, if any funeral directors cited disinfection, public health as the reason for embalming, even implicitly. I agree with Sanders. Only one interviewee used the term memory picture, but most subscribed to the psychological importance of viewing the body.

For Ella Garwood, the embalmed body is central to the healing process and, therefore, the funeral. While her uncle got into the business because he "had a passion for people," she got into the business for the bodies. Garwood realized she had a natural ability for working with bodies — believes that a well embalmed body is central to the healing process.

I did it because I felt a better job could be done restoring a person to their natural likeness which I think manages to help the mourning process. If you look at a person and they look nice - they don't look painted, they don't look gaudy. I think that memory is a better memory. It's a better memory than some remains that I see.

Everybody says, “I want to remember grandma, mama like she was.” That's our job. The job of a good embalmer is to present a remains that is nearly lifelike as possible and that helps them. You can tell it by the comments of the people. “Oh she just looks like she's sleeping. Oh she looks so pretty. Oh she did never look that good when she was living.” And that helps them. They think that death is ugly but it's not. It takes away the sting when they look at a presentable body.

As previously mentioned, embalming itself is not expensive - but the embalmed body is central to all the costly things. No body? No casket. No viewing. The financial incentives are clear, and the the FTC basically concluded that ergo funeral directors were manipulating, didn't believe it: Grief counseling role "appears to have been adopted and espoused by the NFDA not only as further

effort to enhance the funeral director's occupational status by emphasizing service of a quasi-professional nature and implying some type of expertise, but also as a seemingly plausible justification for the sale of expensive services and merchandise that are part of a “traditional funeral”(Federal Trade Commission 1978:60).

The industry incentives are strong, but I don't think individual funeral directors are quite as strategic or (manipulative is not the right word) as that. Most funeral directors I spoke to seemed to genuinely believe that seeing the body was important.

I found that even funeral directors who were deeply cynical about “funeral service” were [not cynical] believed viewing the embalmed body was important for healing, that it was vital to the mourning process. The most surprising and memorable example of this came from Steve, a deeply jaded, no-nonsense, this is all bullshit funeral director at Garozzos. Really, this “lasting impression” the family gets from viewing the body is the only part of funeral directing he seemed to truly believe in. Beyond this lasting impression,

What are you selling them? They don't really need the casket you're selling them. Let's be realistic, this is the biggest BS business in the world. Spending thousands of dollars, spend two thousand dollars to go and bury something?! This is intelligent? Right, right? People really don't need this. Do you need the mourning process? Yes, I'm a firm believer. Yes, you do need to see the body. You do need to wake the body. It's part of healing. You do need a funeral. Don't you want to remember someone's life? Are we worth anything? What, are you just gonna die and that's it?

“But does the body need to be there?” I asked. He had no patience for my question. The answer seemed obvious to him so he presented it back to me. “Well, what do *you* think? Don't you think it gives someone closure to see someone?” I thought an “I wasn't sure” would be enough to re-establish our roles as interviewer and interviewee, but it wasn't. He persisted, “Well, how do *you*

feel?” From the audio of this exchange, I hear a long silence, I assume I was making some non-committal, non-verbal response. This didn’t work.

Kristin, you tell me, if someone in your family died, wouldn’t you want to see them? Wouldn’t you want to have a wake? Wouldn’t you want to have a memorial service? Or you just want to take them and throw them away? Put them out in a bag and put them out on the curb? That’s what you want to do? Honestly, what?”

The questions came in a flood, then silence as waited for an answer. Had it occurred to me that he would turn the interview (I can’t think of any others that did), I might have had a neutral example to offer. On the spot, however, I could only think of one: my dad. He died nearly a decade earlier, but it was, inevitably, the one that came to mind when funeral directors brought up the topic of “memorial services” (usually, but not always, dismissively). When my father died, we took, essentially, Steve’s “curb” option. We had no viewing. We had no wake. Despite our deep roots in the Catholic Church, we had no funeral mass. He didn’t end up on the curb exactly; I happened to be sitting on the front stoop when my father’s cremains were delivered (the paper bag contained the standard issue plastic cremains box). Months after his death we had a memorial service. Unlike other funeral directors (including one at Garozzos, described in Chapter Three) Steve did not go into “funeral director mode” in response to my personal story. There was no “I’m so sorry for your loss” or assurances that we hadn’t done something “wrong.”

Embalming is for healing, but it is not for funeral directors

An overwhelming number of funeral directors I interviewed did not want to be embalmed or viewed or in some cases, any funeral at all.

The time that I need you to come and there is only so much that I want you to be exposed to as a family member. People say they are very strong or whatever but as a funeral director I would not want to see my family relatives during the embalming process.

LC Willis saw the value other people got from it. People find it important to view the body because
But this did not make sense to her, personally.

Now for me? I can't comprehend that. I'm gonna have direct disposition. Direct disposition means once I go, you're to take me directly to my burial ground and then you're going to have a memorial service at my church. Same thing: flowers, prayer cards, programs, speakers, whatever you wanna do, but I'm not there.

I asked if she had all this written down. She didn't yet - but figured she needed to. She'd already encountered resistance to her plan - from her pastor:

I'm going to because my pastor teases me all the time, he says, "No, I'm gonna have you there, I'm gonna sit you up in a chair! I want everybody to see you!" And I say, "No, I don't want anybody looking at me after death." I think that is so... I don't know...I mean, what are we looking at a dead body for? I've never wanted a viewing. I don't think anybody could do my hair right, my makeup. So no, don't be lookin' at me. Don't be lookin' at me. Uh-uh, uh uh! Don't look at me in death. If you put some pictures up around, do that, but don't look at me in death.

Patrice put this reluctance of funeral directors directly on their inside knowledge of the embalming process. They've seen it and they don't want it done to themselves – or, in some cases, their family members.

Most undertakers don't want their loved ones embalmed. Again, life experience. One of my colleagues, his mother passed. He didn't want her embalmed cause he himself had embalmed and the process is a very [long pause], a very rigorous process. Basically you remove all the body fluids and you're replacing them with embalming fluid. You have to make incisions in the body. You have to lift arteries then you have to use an instrument called the trocar to basically burst the organs so that all the blood can be drained. Basically he didn't want his mother to go through that process. He'd done it over course of years and he thought it was basically, well, mutilation.

Avery Thomas, with her decades of embalming experience, did have her loved ones - her mother and brother - embalmed (at the funeral home across the street). I doubt she considered it mutilation, though I never asked. I also never asked what her funeral plans were (it was a common, easy topic, if I didn't ask directly, it usually came up at some point... as it did here). One morning, she hung up

the phone, the conversation was unclear to me, and launched into her own funeral plans - and to my surprise, Avery was another funeral director who would not be embalmed:

I want a direct cremation. It's amazing how they do you on the other side. You in the nursing home for five years and they never come see you. They hear you dead and they're knocking down the door to see you before the family even makes an arrangement. And they do you! Things like - "she looks better dead than she ever did alive." Or "Oh, you put her in that casket?" Or the people that call up and say, "Can you write my name in the book?"

Funeral directing is a calling

I asked everyone to tell me how s/he became a funeral director. Thankfully, everyone told me why. It's a question with a well rehearsed answer. They've not only thought about it, but in many cases, explicitly written out - at least once even before they became funeral directors. In the process of becoming a (licensed) funeral director, specifically, on mortuary school applications, they had to shape the story for their application essay. Most schools ask some variation of "Why do you want to be a funeral director?" At Worsham College Illinois, one of the top ranked programs in the country, they ask applicants to explain "in five hundred words or less, why you have chosen funeral service for your career."

The most common essay answer to the question, according to Worsham faculty member, is: "It is a calling." And yes, that is a good answer.

What do we mean by calling? The dictionary definition of calling is "a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action, especially when accompanied by conviction of divine influence." The essay answer, the term "calling" specifically, was almost never given in interviews, at least not using the term. Calling was often mentioned as why other funeral directors get into it. Marie, in the Bronx, for example, said:

Some people think of it as a calling. You'll hear that a lot from many, many, many funeral directors - that it's a calling - especially from those that did not have family in the profession. The reason is that they feel that they have the ability to be of help.

Marie described calling as a desire, willingness, ability to help people. While "calling" was a rare answer, many funeral directors explained their work in terms of helping people; funeral directing as a helping profession. It may be that calling, a good answer for an application essay, may seem cliché, too lofty or too religious. I asked Marie if there were religious undertones to it. She said:

It sounds like we want to be priests or nuns or whatever, but no, the people who say it just feel that they are able to care for people. That they have a side to them that is able to have respect for the dead, to have respect for the people who have loss.

For Avery, funeral work was her "calling." She embraced the word, owned it, in a way that other funeral directors did not. But she uses it in a way that is familiar, that resembles the way others describe their reasons for becoming funeral directors - as something they were born to do.

It has to be in you already. It's like a craving. A calling. It is. It's kind of weird, but it is like a calling. Every person that I've known that's been a funeral director--it's a calling. It's something they've wanted to do since they were a child.

Though rarely described in terms of a calling, the most common explanation for going into funeral service is some particular (some describe it as peculiar) interest from childhood. There may not be the sense of "divine influence" that calling invokes, but there is a sense of destiny. They reach back to childhood to explain the connection, the seeming inevitability of their career path. In other words, they tell the story with characteristics of a calling, but rarely use the word.

LC Willis [re]starts her story with a particular part of funeral directing's glamor, a part that caught the attention of many of the funeral directors I interviewed: the fancy cars. Growing up near a funeral home in Brooklyn, she would go out of her way to watch the procession of expensive black cars.

As we went to the park, my brothers and friends and everyone would go one way, and I would sneak off to go on the corner of St. Joe and Brooklyn Avenue to look at the funeral processions...to see the black hearse - so pretty! Then to see the limousines and the funeral directors!

Willis started with an interest in the glamor, but ties it to something deeper and characteristic of her self. It was the "the pomp and circumstance that drew her to do this as a child." Back then, she "never thought about the people crying." This changed for her over time, but there was more that suited what she thought of as her innate disposition. Even as a child, she was never afraid of death, never afraid of dying. As she got older, she helped people compose obituaries, generally got involved when someone died. ...

Feroni was also drawn to the fancy cars. At four or five years old, she was "mesmerized" by the slow moving limousines of funeral processions. "I would just stop and freeze, so [my mother] didn't know if I was frightened or what." She wasn't frightened. She was curious. She wondered why the cars were going so slowly, why so many, what's inside? "And as I continued to grow, I did my little investigation, and I found out: Okay. Funeral. Dead people." This didn't scare her or dampen her interest because she had a child's understanding of death - which, in her case, was limited to what she learned from television. "You see people die on this program, you turn to another program you see the same people."

Even those who start with a childhood notice of the glamor flesh out the story with characteristics of themselves that naturalize, almost make inevitable, the "choice" of funeral directing. Like Willis, Feroni notices the glamor, then connects to another level of funeral directing. In Feroni's case, it was a deep interest in the dead - and the dead body. Her "little investigations" moved from "What's in those cars?" to understanding the physical aspects of death. Like other kids, she buried her pets.

Unlike most other kids, she also unburied them. When she unburied them, she found them decomposing, covered in "maggots and stuff like that, because they weren't embalmed, I didn't know about embalming or what have you. So then I'd cover 'em back up." She later peered in undertakers window, asked questions. She described her interest as an "inner something."

Avery was also drawn to funeral directing at a young age. But what drew her attention wasn't the glamor - the cars or the suits - or the idea that she would "get rich." At least this is not how she tells her story. Avery's earliest interest was in the physical body.

I always found it very interesting - the human body. How does it function? How did it go? What happens when this goes wrong? What happens when that goes wrong? Things like that. [The interest in bodies was with her as long as she could remember.] As a young girl, I was always curious about the body [and not just the body, but] the body when it's not living. [When she was about 12 years old, a dog was hit by a car]: And, it wasn't a very good sight. My friend had ran over and said "Ew!! This dog got hit by a car!" and I said "Ooh! Let me go see!" And I ran to see it. And I was like, "Oh my! That's how it looks? That's how it looks? That's how it looks!"

This interest in the body was "always following her." When visiting someone in the hospital, Avery would station herself outside the ER to watch injuries arriving. Like Feroni, she peered into the basement window of the funeral home, trying to catch a glimpse of the bodies - until she was chased away by the funeral director.

Despite this early interest, none of these funeral directors went directly into funeral work. Both Feroni and Avery brought their interest in the body to health related fields first. Avery worked a few years as a home health aide ("one of those mediocre jobs") and considered nursing. But as a home health aid, she realized that she was the "type of person that gets kind of close to people and [she] thought "nursing is not for me. So [she] went into funeral work." Feroni:

I went into nursing. People died on me and I couldn't handle that. People died. We couldn't make them better. I did that, and after that, I said, I don't want to do this.

So what can I do for people that can do absolutely nothing for themselves? The sick, they can maybe blink, scratch they eyes, give you some kind of signal, but the dead? Nothing. So I feel it's my responsibility to give the family a life-like picture, a memorable picture, and not a distorted picture.

Ella Garwood realized later in life that the physical work of funeral directing was her calling. Initially, she was not interested in joining her family's funeral business. ("It didn't seem like such a glamorous profession to me at the time.") Her uncle needed help in the office and recruited Garwood, assuring her that she wouldn't have to do anything related to funerals, "just organize the office... [But] "of course, I was exposed to the funeral service and I looked at the bodies." She couldn't understand why it was taking them all day to prepare the bodies especially when the body came out "and didn't look that great to me." When she brought this up with her uncle, he challenged her: "if you think you're so good, why don't you try embalming?" She went to mortuary school, learned how to embalm and dress and

I did an excellent job and it didn't take me a whole day to do it. And I think it was just a natural calling because it came so easy to me. I was the kind of person - still up to today I can't cut up a chicken - but I can embalm a body. That's funny. I can't cut up a chicken, you know.

Embalming was a "natural calling" for Garwood, but she had troubles. When she graduated mortuary school in the 1950s, she knew of only five women in funeral service in Chicago and she found the industry was not welcoming to women. "They would say nasty things. You were out of place. You were taking a man's job. It was really rough on us. They finally accepted it." They accepted it, she explained, because she proved her skill as an embalmer. In a survey of Chicago funeral directors "I ended up being number one. After that I got a lot of respect. I was the best embalmer in Chicago."

Pine argues that funeral directors cannot escape the "contamination by death... people view individuals in such work as different . . . because they feel that they themselves could never do it and that there must be something "strange" about those who voluntarily choose to do it"(Pine 1975:38). Taking a historical perspective, Thompson notes that lay people - families, friends - once *did* do this work. Before funeral directing became a distinct occupation, the "unsavory but necessary responsibility of disposing of a loved one's body" was work done by family members or friends of the deceased. That individuals, *strangers* of the deceased *chose* to "work with dead bodies for compensation" made funeral directors a source of "skepticism and even disdain." According to Thompson, while early undertakers tried "to counter the stigma" of violating taboos about handling the dead by emphasizing the science of embalming, this backfired. Instead of the intended effect - getting the science based prestige given to medicine - embalmers were "almost immediately surrounded by mystery and viewed as unusual, if not downright weird"(1991:408).

I was struck by a pattern in interviews. When asked "How did you become a funeral director," an overwhelming number offered, within the first minute, whether or not they were from a funeral family.¹⁷ Given the preponderance of funeral directors that are from funeral families, maybe this makes sense. . .But it was almost as if the question were: Were you born into this (which is also not quite "choosing" it) or do you have another way to account for yourself? This narrative of inevitability may serve to diminish the stigma, the "strangeness." It is not a choice, it is a destiny.

¹⁷ On "*born into*": Interviewees regularly volunteered the number of classmates from "funeral families" (always high) when I asked anything about the program. Often with some revetment from those who weren't. The NFDA doesn't report stats on funeral families, but seems to want to combat this reputation for insularity in its recruitment materials, assuring potential funeral directors that, though "Funeral Service has been a "family" profession, with firms being passed down from one generation to the next.... Many of today's mortuary school graduates do not have family members working in funeral service" (NFDA).

This is not a new idea. Weber argued that status groups evolve into castes, become stigmatized when status distinctions produce conceptions of "ritualistic impurity and . . . stigma." In response to this stigmatization, "even pariah peoples who are the most despised . . . are apt to continue cultivating the belief in their own specific "honor"... With the negatively privileged status groups the sense of dignity takes a special deviation... The sense of dignity of the negatively privileged state naturally refers to a future lying beyond the present...In other words, *it must be nurtured by the belief in a providential mission*(1968:933-4).

Funeral directing is glamorous.

Undertaking? Why it's the dead-surest business in Christendom, and the nobbiest.
- Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* 1883

"I had a young girl," Avery told me in our first interview, "she approached me in the supermarket. She wanted to become a funeral director. She said, "Please, please, please." She didn't know me, she'd just seen me working across the street." Avery met with her, told her about the work, emphasizing her long hours and modest salary, gave her information about mortuary schools. She quickly realized that the girl "didn't know anything about funeral directing," nor did she seem interested in the details. Avery concluded, "she was just interested in the glamor. The fact that you can wear a suit all the time. The fact that it doesn't seem like you're working but you are. She really didn't seem to see behind the glamour."

So far, I've talked primarily about the stigma of funeral directing - largely because the "dirty work" of funeral directing is the focus of the academic literature. The dirty work, the stigma, the contamination of bodily contact, is clear, accessible, has language and a whole literature. This other side is more nebulous, dynamic, context, even individual experience contingent. This is the status of funeral directing. It appears, as status tends to, as a myriad of concepts, words, reference points -

prestige, glamor, prominence, pride, money, influence. Spencer Cahill's ethnography, for example, focuses on how mortuary schools give students the tools, the rhetoric, they will need to assert their professionalism and diminish the stigma of the profession. At the same time, he cites a newspaper interview with one of these students who clearly sees the profession differently.

As one of those recent recruits to funeral direction told a newspaper reporter, "the funeral director was like the president. You didn't speak to him unless you had something important to say. I got into it for the prestige aspect" (1995:118).

There is a glamor to funeral directing. The idea of "glamor" of course, is a nebulous, imperfect sociological metric of status, but related in the real world. Glamor, a word I only occasionally encounter in conversation and rarely use, came up with remarkable frequency in my interviews with funeral directors. Sometimes, they acknowledged this sense within themselves. Louise Harrison, a second generation funeral director in the Bronx, said funeral directing "made [her] feel special. The funeral business can make you feel very special. It does what people in Bloomingdales are paid to do - give you a boost, walking around in a suit." Most often, they used "glamor" to describe outsiders perception of their jobs.

Like Avery, many of the funeral directors I interviewed have been approached by people curious about funeral directing. Most had a similar response - outsiders only see the external trappings of status - the suits, the cars - they don't understand the "real" work. The glamor, the external appearances, according to Harrison, make the work look easy and, for some, appealing. They think, "Oh, I can do that! They see you in a suit. You get to talk to people and be very social. That's how people get sucked into it." But the suit and the socializing, the ease of the work, is "such a small fraction of the whole thing. Everyone sees you in a suit. Nobody gets to see you wearing the rubber gloves and the apron."

Edith, a funeral director at a prominent Harlem establishment described the effort that went into maintaining what she called the “Big Willie” image of the funeral director in the community.

You’re never off duty even when you’re off duty. [You maintain that] professional manner, that professional attire, when you’re off duty. You are not in your jeans and sneakers. Your hair is *not* let down. You don’t do that. That’s a no-no. And maybe that was to preserve that image, that prestige, but, because funeral directors are looked upon with such regard that you don’t want to disappoint them to the point that they feel disillusioned with you.

Funeral directors often told me that others were drawn into the business by the “glamor,” suits, money, or other trappings of status. Marie, for example, estimated that while the majority (“a good 90%”) of her mortuary school classmates “knew what they were getting into, there was that other 10% that chose it because it’s something glamorous and had that appeal.” Charles, her co-worker interrupted to agree. As a second-generation funeral director, he knew what he was getting into, but some of his classmates were there because they figured “they could get rich quick and make a lot of money.” One Harlem funeral director, put it this way, “All they see is the glamor. The pretty cars. Most people don’t see the dirty work in this business.”

I did see the dirty work - if by dirty work we mean embalming. While watching Joe embalm, he said, “people think, oh, you’re a funeral director, you must have it so easy. They think, oh, you must make a ton of money. They don’t see this,” he said, holding up a carotid artery, his apron spattered with blood. I was prepared for gruesome. This was a body Eddie and picked up from the Kingsbrook morgue hours earlier. I noticed the feet were wrapped in thick layers of plastic. Assuming these were covering lesions, decomposition, skin slip, I was apprehensive when Joe opened the body bag back at Garozzos. Body bags, plural. This body was double bagged. The first bag filled with pooling blood. Joe caught this in time to direct most of it down the drain, but some hit the floor, some splattered on Joe. Most of the time I was struck by how little splashing there was. Each time an

artery was cut, an organ punctured, stitches removed, I expected blood to spurt. It rarely did, and I was never hit.

The glamor can be separated out from the dirty work. Clearly it is in the imagination of some. Remember, historically these were different jobs - the funeral director and the undertaker - the former assuming the social, suit wearing, socializing side, the latter doing the behind the scenes "dirty work." While the jobs have officially been combined, in reality, many funeral directors attend to only one role or the other.

At each field site, I encountered stark examples of the divided roles. Ace, the co-owner of Armstrongs relished the "Big Willie" role. He directed funerals in larger than life fashion. He never embalmed. Possibly because he was never trained to. Ace has "been in the business of funeral directing since 1982" according to his published bio. There is no mention of his degree because he never went to mortuary school; he has no license. He is an imposing figure, large personality, and relishes, brandishes the funeral director role. Under his directorship, I participated in the most glamorous funeral I had seen. Everything was top of the line - the program, flowers (and the rare flower car). The casket was *The Ambassador*, one of the most expensive available, made more impressive because it was oversized. There were thirty-two pallbearers, each with a corsage and named in the program.

Whereas funeral directors often keep a low profile in church, Ace was a major presence. Armstrongs was the only field site where I was given instruction on what to wear. For this funeral, however, the usual attire - black pants, white shirt¹⁸- was not fancy enough. I was to wear dark blue skirt and

¹⁸ Conveniently, I saved the white shirts and black pants I'd collected long ago from my time as a waiter.

heels¹⁹. Ace informed me that I should wear a dark blue skirt and heels. For most of the service, I, along with four skirted and heeled funeral directors, was stationed at the front of Abyssinian Baptist Church, standing, honor guard style at the casket as hundreds of attendees paid their last respects. For Ace, funeral directing was glamorous.

Worsham College, one of the top ranked mortuary programs in the country, asks applicants to explain "in five hundred words or less, why you have chosen funeral service for your career." "Glamor" was not among the answers Worsham faculty reported.

But the money and the suits were a big part of why David Hirsch chose funeral service for his career. (He describes it more as a "drift" than a "choice.") When he first graduated high school, he "worked around. Factories, mostly. Nothing specific – refrigerator factory, leather goods, screws and bolts... things like that." A family friend was manager at a Queens funeral home and asked Hirsch to help out. The work was at night, part time, and, as Hirsch described it, it was easy "just standing around in suits all the time." This was not only less demanding than his factory jobs, but it also "paid a lot. Good money." And, unlike the blue collar factory work, it was "a gentleman's job....so [he] decided to go into that." Hirsch, unlike Louise or Joe, did not proceed to impress upon me the difficulty of the work. He didn't mention the "dirty work," the "rubber gloves" or the long hours. After forty years in the business, Hirsch still thought of funeral directing, with its suits and its standing around, as a "gentleman's job."

¹⁹ I owned neither. He conceded to a navy suit and flats.

So, is it a glamorous job? That's an impossible question for me to answer. That's a question of their experience. And it varied. Ace acted like it was glamorous. Funeral directors imagined people saw their work as glamorous. Some told me they were treated like "shit on a shoe" because of it.

What about the money? Is it good money? On this question, at least, we have hard numbers to look to. In 2017, the median income for all funeral service workers was \$56,850; within this broad category, the median was significantly higher for managers (\$75,000) and slightly lower than the median (\$51,000) for "morticians, undertakers and funeral directors". And yet, I would say, the objective income answer is still unsatisfying. It misses important story lines.

When I began the project, I subscribed to the common wisdom - of Mark Twain, of funeral directors, of people I encountered during my field work-that funerals are a "dead sure business," or at least a solid career. There were the common refrains of: "people always die," "there's never a shortage of clients," "time for the baby boomers," etcetera. When I met people out on funerals with, I realized they often assumed I was an intern. One Greenwood Cemetery official was particularly encouraging about my presumed career potential. Patting me warmly on the shoulder, he said "It's a great line of work. It's recession proof. People always need us."

But, as I learned, funeral business is not the "dead-surest business in Christendom"... at least not for everyone. The median income data obscures important disparities, largely by race. Chapter four will look more closely at this with Armstrong Funeral Home in the South Bronx. There, I found Avery, ready to quit. Even though it was her calling, she had a passion for the work. She just wasn't making enough money. So when the young girl approached her in the supermarket, eager to get in on the glamor, Avery tried to dissuade her. She sat her down, told her, "The hours is not that good.

The pay is not that well. If you own your own place, there's no benefits. It gives you back nothing and takes everything from you." But Avery could not get her to "see beyond the glamor."

I tried to tell her, but I got to the point where I don't want to bust nobody's dream, you know? I tried my best to tell her. She was like, "No I want to be it." So I said, "Let me step back." She went to school. She graduated. She got the job. And she quit! She couldn't stand it! Because she said it was too many hours and no pay. She quit.

I heard similar reports from other black funeral directors. Feroni, like Avery, loved the job, considered it her calling, but said, "I don't want to do this anymore. It's satisfying and gratifying, but it's not financially rewarding." Clarence, high up in the ranks of the black national association laughed at the idea that any funeral director made \$100,000 a year. When Harrison heard rumors that SCI was "really great salaries - like sixty or seventy thousand a year as a funeral director or manager!" She was incredulous. If she were making that kind of money, she could "live like such a rich woman!"

Funeral markets .

Economists, in some ways, agree with the common wisdom. The fact is, funeral homes have the lowest failure rate of any type of small business - so maybe it is a sure business. The funeral market vexes efficiency oriented economists; it appears to be immune to the normal rules of supply and demand. On the supply side, the market is oversaturated (Torres 1988; Smith 1996; Harrington 2008). We know less about the demand side. We know how many people die per year, but limited information on consumer's decision making processes, what drives their preference for one funeral home over the other.

The supply-side over-saturation is well documented. The Funeral Consumers Alliance (2007) , for example, offers a simple illustration using readily available information: number of deaths and

number of funeral homes in a given area. If each funeral home put on five funerals per week, how many funeral homes would an area need to meet the demand (number of deaths)? By this estimation, New York State would need about six hundred funeral homes. There are nearly *two thousand*. New York City would need about two hundred; there are over four hundred.

The average funeral home puts on 112 per year-or roughly 2 funerals per week (NFDA 2011). The number doesn't line up with the official job description from the industry or the Labor Department, or the descriptions of funeral directors - all describing "long hours, including nights and weekends"(Bureau of Labor Statistics). Part of it is the unpredictable, erratic distribution of the work . Death "establishments must be prepared at all times in spite of wide variations in daily, weekly, or monthly demand for its services.... For the general run of small establishments, there may be days or even weeks between "calls" (Smith 1996:43)

By normal rules of supply and demand, an oversaturated market leads to business failure. This is not the case for funeral homes. Despite the oversupply, funeral homes have among the lowest closure rate of any type of business (Torres 1988, Smith 1996). Not only do they rarely go under but also they are slow to change ownership (they are often passed down generation to generation within families); new funeral homes rarely open. They are "the longest lived firms on record" (Smith 1996:115). Why? Economists attribute this to the industry's resistance to change and its political influence - pushing through laws that limit competition and protect the status quo. Laws vary by state, but at least one of these competition limiting restrictions applies to New York State - the so called "ready to embalm" laws (Harrington 2007).

Further inefficiencies, according to the economists, get us into rare terrain for economists: culture. Another driver of funeral inefficiencies are ethnic and religious "preferences." According to economist Ronald Smith, author of *The Death Care Industry*, these cultural preferences "segment the industry, prevent rationalization and consolidation, contribute to the proliferation of non-competitive small operators. Diverse cities are particularly susceptible to this type of inefficiency"(1996:271).

And the demand side of the funeral market? We know less about that. Death rates alone don't tell us much about demand. We can take into account some straightforward factors - like laws. But really, the demand side of the equation is largely the decision making processes of funeral consumers - and the tricky domain of consumer "preferences." How do people choose funeral homes? We know much less about this.

The most consistent finding is: proximity. People choose the funeral home nearest to them (Federal Trade Commission 2006; Harrington 2008; Smith 1996). Given the segregation in the United States, this makes it difficult to separate out preference for funeral homes by race. Does choosing a business owned by a co-ethnic mean a preference for co-ethnicity-or convenience? Does residential segregation produce these patterns of co-ethnic patronage by function of proximity.

Is it segregation or preference? It's question for ethnic economies in general- to oversimplify it: are the forces that create co-ethnic patronage negative or positive? Is the force social distancing? A refusal by majority business owners to serve the minority - thereby "forcing" minorities to open their own businesses?) Or are they created positively from within the minority communities - an appreciation of insider knowledge, or a "loyalty" to the community - a race patronage, if you will.

According to a research team led by Howard Aldrich, the most common explanation for ethnic economies is “social distance,” where, they explain “shopkeepers from the dominant group find it distasteful or demeaning to do business with ethnic minorities, and they lack the knowledge necessary to serve minorities effectively”(1995:997). And again, we have social distance as both a positive (status like) or negative (stigma-like) indicator. Positively: where co-ethnic business owners have easier access to the market because they “possess an insider’s knowledge of the special, culturally based tastes of their co-ethnics, while outsiders lack this knowledge” or negatively: “business owners in a socially or politically dominant group refuse to serve customers from a particular ethnic minorities”(Aldrich et al. 1995:997)

Sociologists, like Aldrich et al (1985), have asked this question - are ethnic economies the preference for co-ethnicity (the “protected consumer hypothesis”) or simply an artifact of residential segregation. They found: it depends. In their study, it depended upon the type of business - and the types of interactions involved between server and served. Were they fleeting and instrumental? Or were the interactions more sustained, repeated, requiring more information exchange? At businesses with fleeting, transactional interactions (i.e. grocery stores), proximity mattered more than ownership. Where transactions were more sustained and required more knowledge of customer tastes (i.e. clothing stores) the owners and customers were more likely to be from the same group.

Research by DiMaggio and Louch, similarly, find in-group preferences for what they call “risky” transactions-where cost and uncertainty about the product is high and the likelihood of regular exchange is low. Trust is important in uncertain, potentially high risk exchanges-and people are more

likely to trust people in their in-group. Ethnic economies, “appear to be systems of this kind” (1998:623).

Funeral homes offer an excellent case study for ethnic economies. Funeral services are a type of risky purchase. They are generally expensive, rare, and difficult to assess. They require extended contact and, presumably, more knowledge of consumer tastes. If inter-ethnic exchange goes down in the extent of interaction spectrum from grocery store to clothing store, it would seem to follow that a more pronounced preference for homogeneity would exist in the more extended, and arguably, more culturally specific funeral market. In light of the studies and some general expectations, it seems reasonable to expect that funeral homes that, “cater to specific populations by focusing on the customs and rituals associated with one or more religious, ethnic, or cultural heritage groups”(Federal Trade Commission 2006:4) would be owned by and/or staffed by funeral directors of those cultural heritage groups.

Furthermore, the study analyzed ethnicity and distance as separate determinants. Based on their data, they concluded that, even taking distance into account, “Ethnic preferences can be strong...While consumers prefer close by funeral homes, they are willing to travel to obtain funeral services from co-ethnics” (Chevalier, Harrington, and Morton 2009:5).

On closer inspection, however, their findings apply not to ethnicity but to race; even more strikingly, the findings appear to be less about “preference for” than “aversion to”. Stunningly, their conclusion that “ethnic markets can be strong” is based this conclusion is based on one strong finding: Whites will go out of their way to avoid a black funeral home. “Whites,” according to the study, “are willing to pay more and travel farther to bypass a black funeral home. In particular, the

point estimates suggest that, for a given price, a white customer would be willing to travel 16 miles farther, other things equal, to patronize a non-black funeral home" (Chevalier, Harrington, and Morton 2009:22).

Shinnar's "lingering question" - could it be community prestige, satisfaction, status?

A final topic of interest would be to assess other non-tangible success measures for the business such as owner's satisfaction. For example, minority entrepreneurs may derive satisfaction from serving their co-ethnic community. Possibly, entrepreneurs focusing on a predominantly co-ethnic clientele who pay a penalty in terms of financial performance are still satisfied with their business and derive satisfaction from serving their co-ethnic community (Shinnar 2011:656).

What do we know about preferences anyway?

But any discussion of why someone chooses is really a question about motivation, preferences.

What motivates the preference for a local funeral home is difficult to discern. However, we do know that funeral markets are local. According to market research, two thirds of Americans prefer local, independently owned funeral homes; only two percent prefer a corporate one (Wirthlin 2005).

The corporate takeover of the small, family, community funeral homes was a looming threat. It hasn't happened. And it may not. "SCI has been an emerging giant since the 1960s, but the 1990s saw nearly exponential expansion for the company. SCI went from 1400 firms in 1992 to 4500 by the end of the decade" (Sanders 2012:271). After years of expansion, the major funeral corporations (SCI, Lowens, Alderwoods) faced record losses in the early 2000s and began a dramatic retreat - divesting properties, and in the case of Lowens, filing for bankruptcy.

SCI is well aware of this and explicitly incorporate this industry truism into their acquisition strategy.

When they purchase local funeral homes, they bought "businesses that have built reputations and

good will in their communities over many years”(Robbins 1998). They keep the name of the local funeral home, retain the owner or manager known to the community. And they keep the corporate ownership invisible. The corporate name shows up nowhere, leaving the impression in the neighborhood that the funeral home has not changed. SCI’s brand, “Dignity,” can be found around the edges of the funeral home (on the website, merchandise or literature offerings in the funeral home), but, for most consumers, it’s subtle enough that it does not scream “corporate ownership.” This “branding process,” according to SCI’s *Annual Report*, “is intended to emphasize our seamless national network of funeral service locations and cemeteries, the original names associated with acquired operations, and their inherent goodwill and heritage, generally remain the same”(SCI 2010:7).

This system, according to New York funeral directors, has been insufficient to give SCI all the advantages of a community funeral home. Even at the height of their expansion, corporate funeral homes struggled to gain a foothold in New York City. The most common explanation for the failure of the corporate funeral industry in New York City, according to funeral directors, was some variation of “community,” some advantage that someone from the community had over a funeral director working for a corporation - from personal connections to financial sensitivity and flexibility. Steve at Garozzos scoffed at the threat of SCI: “you can’t corporatize an ethnic area.” LC Willis says corporate “won’t work in the black world.” Both say the reason is because of the lack of flexibility. It’s not about race or ethnicity, per se, but about the community connection and flexibility/ trust that helps to maintain it.

CHAPTER THREE

Garozzo funeral home in Canarsie, Brooklyn, is one of the largest in New York City. The two story, 11,000 square foot covers a full city block. Parking lots on each side conquer another two. Canarsie is - and feels - far from Manhattan. The trip from my home - the northern tip of Manhattan - to Garozzos - on the South Shore of Brooklyn easily took two hours. It felt even farther. Except for a cluster of stores around the subway stop (dollar and convenience stores, a pizzeria, jerk chicken restaurants), there is little street life and few commercial areas. Canarsie is a quiet neighborhood, block after block of one and two family homes, complete with front yards, fences, back yards - even driveways, almost suburban. The funeral directors regularly asked about my commute. They'd marvel at the time it took, but mostly they were concerned about my safety. My 10-15 minute trip from the subway to the funeral home, was a tranquil, tree lined walk. Still, they worried about me. Their concerns both paternalistic (I was the only female around) and implicitly, some days explicitly, a warning about race. I don't think they ever experienced Canarsie from outside of their cars.

When Garozzos opened in the 1950s, Canarsie was an Italian and Jewish neighborhood. In the following decades, New York City changed dramatically : the financial crisis of the 70s, overwhelming white flight, rising crime rates. New York was lawless, dangerous. South Shore neighborhoods of Brooklyn - Canarsie, Bensonhurst, Gravesend experienced little of this city wide upheaval. While whites fled Brooklyn in droves, the South Shore kept its white population. They worked at it, and it worked well for decades. Until the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2000 Canarsie's population flipped faster and more dramatically than any other city neighborhood. White flight came later to this corner of Brooklyn because Canarsie's white residents resisted integration with heels dug in. Sociologist Jonathan Reider chronicled the early years of the transition, and the virulent, often

violent opposition to integration in his 1985 book *Canarsie: Italians and Jews Against Liberalism*. Despite strong opposition, the black population of Canarsie increased by 500% in single decade. By 2010, Canarsie was more than 90% black - specifically Caribbean black.

When Steve Sebbeto became the manager in 1990, "Italian was spoken in the lobby." By the time I arrived in 2008, it was Creole, not Italian, I heard in the lobby. According to Steve, Garozzo funeral home didn't do Italian funerals anymore: "None, none, none. It's a hundred percent Caribbean. Everybody who works here is Italian-American, but we're a Caribbean funeral home." There are major advantages to being a Caribbean funeral home - which Steve emphasized in our first interview. In light of the primary threat to the funeral industry - the rise of cremation and the decline of the "traditional" funeral, the major advantage that stand out is - Caribbeans rarely cremate.

The money was good for Steve and the four other funeral directors at Garozzos. In 2012 (when I was doing fieldwork), the median pay was under 50k for funeral directors. The top 10% made over \$80,000. Steve has "a kid" (a funeral director in his 30s) working for him, "that makes about a hundred and twenty a year, with perks. It's good money. "The least paid director" makes eighty five thousand a year. So, the least paid staff at Garozzos (a high school drop out and not a licensed funeral director) is making as much as the top 10% of funeral directors nationally. At Garozzos, funeral directing "is good money."

The threat to Garozzos is not profit losing cremation. It's Haitians. It took some time to understand this.

“Respect” for funerals

Funeral directors consistently mention two features of the Caribbean funeral consumer: respect for funerals and delayed burials. There are different indicators of this respect: choosing burial over cremation, the choice of full, traditional funerals, religious services and large turnouts. "Unlike in other cultures, where you have direct cremations," said Steve, it's rare among his Caribbean customers. Direct cremation is the least profitable work for funeral homes. In addition to the low profit margin, Steve explained that direct cremation shrinks the funeral directors job to "just a body pick up, delivery, and paperwork" - all behind the scenes, the dirtiest of their work and paperwork, with no place, no need, for any public role of funeral directing.

Once or twice per month, Steve did get cremation cases. But, there was a key distinction: these were not direct. Caribbeans consume funerals exactly as the industry hoped most people would in this era of cremation. Cremate? Fine, as long as there's a full funeral first. Funeral directors, with few weird state exceptions, receive no money from either option of final disposition. They can charge to transport the body to either the crematorium or the cemetery - but the costs and profits of cremation or burial are out of the hands of funeral directors.

So the vast majority of Garozzos cases involve full funerals. There's some cremation but with full funeral. The preponderance of the cases are full, traditional funeral including cemetery burial. They also ship lots of bodies overseas for burial. Steve laid out the financial benefits. While a direct cremation costs \$995, "A full, traditional funeral, may cost a family, sixty-five hundred dollars, seven thousand, eight thousand, nine thousand dollars, depending on what the family picks." He paused. "A funeral home is a business. You try to have feelings for people, but we're in business to make money, of course. And the more people want, the more money we make."

And Caribbeans want, by US standards, more than most. "I'm always amazed," said Steve, "They don't skimp nothing. The clothing they bring for their loved one? Everything brand new, everything top shelf." He appreciated this about Caribbeans - they respect the funeral like he does. Valuing funerals 'properly,' was consistent with Steve's impressions of Caribbean culture at large: they're "a people" that stress traditional values: hard work, respectability, proper conduct, education:

They're working people, good people. You know, dual working families. They stress education. They stress a funeral. See, that's the thing, the culture of a people matters. And a funeral is important to them and it's important to us. Our profit is built on that - that they don't disregard their dead.

This "regard" for the dead, the "respect" for the funeral was evidenced by the size of the funerals. The turnout at Caribbean funerals was additional evidence of this "respect for the funeral." At Garozzos, the funerals were large. Friday nights often had four simultaneous services, all well attended, regularly exceeding the building fire code capacity of 500. Even populations that usually have lower turnouts (e.g. the very elderly, recently arrived immigrants, or the long term institutionalized) had fifty or more attendees. When over a hundred people showed up for a 94 year old woman's funeral, I marveled to Steve. I didn't know that many people. Steve scoffed: "Neither did she. But, she's Caribbean - and the whole community comes out for a funeral - whether you really knew them or not." Garozzos had customers from other Caribbean Islands, but Haitians were the majority - and the Haitians had the largest funerals. When I asked Steve why, he figured it was the publicity. *Radio du Soleil*, the local Haitian radio station, announced funerals as community events.

Maguires funeral home in Flatbush Brooklyn is not quite as large as Garozzos - but both are size outliers among the city's funeral homes. The previous life of Maguires explained the size. Until the mid 60s, it was a movie theater. The vast space is critical to courting the Caribbean population, explained Tom Mack, the manager. "They come for the space. They all want to sit 300 people. They

show up three, four hundred people for a service. Whether they came from the same community among the islands or they're all cousins and whatever. They *really bury their dead*."

"Somebody will die today and they have the wake two weeks from Friday. They wait. They have people flying in.... The delayed funeral Mack described is the other other stand out feature of the Caribbean funeral. Among Caribbeans and some African immigrants, it is common to wait weeks or a month between death and burial. This, according to Mack and others, allows the family time to plan the funeral, notify relatives and make often difficult travel arrangements. Since there is time to plan in advance, they can choose the day that is best suited to turnout among working, traveling people. [In contrast to the spectrum of short windows between death and burial for Jews, Muslims, and many white Christians]. Garozzos was relatively quiet many nights of the week - just one or two funerals. But come Friday nights and Saturday mornings, Garozzos ran at full capacity.

I continued to ask Steve about the change, the differences. Steve insisted that the main change in his work was the delay in burial. "The big difference," he said was "if an Italian dies this morning, they're looking to lay them out tomorrow and bury them the next day. In the Caribbean community it's nothing to hold the body ten to twenty days."

At Garozzos, another advantage was the fact that there was a shared religious culture. Like the majority of Italian Americans, "the majority of the Caribbeans we service are Catholic, so they go to church. The service is very much the same." Along with the positives, the profits, the respect for funerals, the willingness to go "top shelf," Steve also emphasized the similarities between his previous Italian American clientele and his current - Caribbean, downplaying, any and downplayed any "real" differences. The only "real" difference was the delay in burial.

Was there really no difference? Was there really no change, nothing new to him? Steve insisted that "no, there was nothing new to him," and offered his epiphany, change of heart that he had early on, when, it seems, he had some hesitation about the change, "In fact, years ago, when we started doing Caribbean work, I'll never forget it, it was like 1994 when it really changed. And there were women in the lobby screaming. I remember looking at my dad, and I said, "Jeez, these people are yelling." He goes, "Don't make fun. That was your grandmother and great-grandmother years ago." And then, it dawned on me - it's true. The only difference is the delay in the wake, where Italians want to hurry up and do everything."

Another difference became clear over time. .

"When it was an Italian funeral home, I knew the people."

Everett C. Hughes explicitly centralizes culture as key to status.²⁰ For Hughes, the elevation of status depends upon the nature of the relationship between the individual and the group.

Status is a term of society in that it refers specifically to a system of relations between people... But the definition of a status lies in a culture. In fact, one of the essential features of a person's status may be his identification with a culture (1949:59).
(Italics mine.)

Steve and the funeral directors at Garozzos strongly identify with their Italian-American culture. In our first meeting, Steve described Garozzos as a "Caribbean funeral home" but was quick to add that the owner and all of the funeral directors were Italian American. Tony, the owner, hand picked each from his personal connections. Steve, Howard, Michael, Matt/ Joe - all know Tony outside of work, socialize with him. Yet, they talked about him as a larger than life character. He was "the richest man I'd ever met," a gun strapped, street smart, billionaire with "useful" connections. This larger than life billionaire was almost invisible in real life. Tony owns four funeral homes in

²⁰ Edward Shils, using different language offers a similar idea: audience. For Shils, charisma, and therefore, status, depends upon the individuals relationship to the audience and their response.

Brooklyn and Queens; one (the crown jewel of the empire) out on Staten Island. Every day, Tony religiously visited each, emptying the safes, checking on things. His visits put the Garozzo guys on edge, but few outsiders would even notice his presence. He was low key, low drama, and really short. While I didn't expect he would introduce himself as "the richest man I'd ever meet," his self-effacing, humble introduction (which, according to Steve, he used with Condolezza Rice), was "I'm Tony.... Tony, from Greenpoint."

Turnover was low, to say the least, at Garozzos. I was there for what was probably a once in a decade new hire. Joe, the "new guy" was, like the others, Italian American, Brooklyn born, and got the job through a personal connection to Tony. The guys complained so much about Joe, I finally asked Michael if anyone called his references. The question surprised, seemed to even insult him. He scoffed, "No. Of course not! Tony would never do a thing like that to him...It's not like that. I'm sure someone said to Tony, "I got this guy, he's a good guy." It wouldn't be right."

The difference in the Caribbean business is, when it was an Italian funeral home, I knew the people. You literally knew everyone in the neighborhood. I don't know my customers now. So it's more like a factory-type thing. But when I worked in Corona, I knew everyone. Every person that was in that funeral home in Corona, I knew. I was invited to baptisms, I was invited to weddings, I was invited to graduations. I knew everyone. This is a different type of business, because, unfortunately, it's bottom line.

When Steve first got to Garozzos, he "knew" the people in the largely Italian neighborhood. He was invited to baptisms and weddings and graduations. When the funeral director is from the neighborhood, from the community, funeral directing looks different. Funerals, too, were different back then - for Steve. They were "more of a public event when this neighborhood was Italian." This was especially true for the funerals of local gangsters - which Steve described as a "big to-do." The funeral itself was highly orchestrated, filled with "pomp and circumstance." Status, community prominence, came with the role of the funeral director in charge of such a big "to-do," community

wide ritual. "It was," said Steve, "a feather in your cap to have so-and-so, you know? In a neighborhood like this, certain individuals were like royalty. They ran the neighborhood."

It was a deliberate choice.

Years ago I used to tell my guys, "If an Italian family walks in at the same time and a black family walk in at the same time, we're gonna take care of the black family." And I used to catch a lot of grief from the Italian holdouts in the area, like, "Steve, how can you do this to, to us? I don't want my mother in the building with a black family." Literally, used to catch it. I said, "Well, you got a for sale sign on your house. Who do I have to service?" I mean, you know, this was a neighborhood of, ah, you know, ah, this was a neighbor-, a good neighborhood years ago. I caught a lot of grief."

And a compromise.

When it first started happening, it was like, "What do we do?" The white family doesn't want to be all mixed up in the same place with people screaming and yelling. And the white people, they view from 2-4 and 7-9. They come back at seven and suddenly there are all these people going crazy. What? Do we schedule them on different days? But now we're doing good. We're busy. It's good money.

There is a choice here - between the status and money - the status of serving your own (with the related stigma of serving this other) and the money of serving this "other". Steve made the choice to make the money. He spoke fondly of his work in Corona - then an Italian American neighborhood. So why did he leave? It was a dead end, he said. When Tony bought Garozzos, he "saw an opportunity to grow. It was a good move financially."

It's a compromise that many of his peers would not make. Funeral directors have told him, "I wouldn't work with those people. I couldn't work there. I don't care how much money they pay you." In the recorded interview, Steve was dismissive of those peers who would let prejudice, pride, status, interfere with the rational business decision. The fact that peers would choose status, not serving this non-white "other" - over the profit - was ridiculous. They won't work at Garozzos?

"Alright, fine," he said, "Go sit over there in lily-white wherever and make six hundred dollars a week. I got guys making six hundred a day here."

Steve still put on big "to do" funerals - not for mob "royalty" - but for prominent Haitian political leaders. But it was different. Steve's distance from the people he served changed his experience. While a mob royalty funeral was a "feather in your cap," a state funeral for a Haitian dignitary was less so. Take, for example, his work with the Vice Counsel of Haiti. "We bury his family. So, I met him. I could call him and he would know me on a first name basis." He seemed to derive some pride, some status from this. But the experience was different. Steve was less central, less part of the activities - even as he was technically "in charge." This distance, separation, was clear when he recalled a "movie like" funeral event for a Haitian dignitary. In detail, Steve recounted, relived, the size, the scale, the drama of the funeral. There were over two thousand people - including prominent leaders of the Haitian Government. There were swarms of secret service agents from both Haiti and the United States. Major roadways were closed for the motorcade. It was, said Steve, "something out of a movie."

As the funeral director, technically in charge of this even, Steve was, on one hand, at the center of this event, directing this movie. On the other hand, Steve was an outsider. For one, he was directing a movie in a language he didn't understand, with no subtitles. He was an outsider, unsure even what the movie was about. He knew this was high profile, the secret service agents told him about the dignitaries, the politicians, that even the First Lady of Haiti would be at Garozzos. So he had indications that this was going to be large, but "With the language barrier, I didn't know just how big." Not only could he not anticipate the size, he couldn't read the crowd, he didn't know the crowd, he didn't know much about their community, culture and especially politics. He had been

impressed that the First Lady would be there. What he didn't realize until the funeral started was "that the people of Haiti hated Aristide!" Suddenly, the big "to-do" looked more complicated and potentially ominous - and he wasn't sure what to expect.

Knowing the people matters for status. But it's knowing *your* people. In theory, Steve could "know" Caribbean clients. But he doesn't. He was distant from them and he distanced himself *from* them. This difference is fundamental to understanding Steve as a funeral director, his relationship to his work, his experience of the status - and stigma - of his occupation. There was a stigma to his work - the stigma of working with these "other" people.

Stigma

Hughes and Shils recognize that groups, audiences, the types of people making up these groups, matter in the creation, the elevation of status. Neither consider the other possibility - that who the audience is can have the inverse effect in terms of status. Audience can degrade status, can stigmatize. This (one sided) perspective is consistent with the oversight that pervades the status and stigma literature at large: though they're related phenomenon, they're studied separately, silo style. Social distance is an indicator both status and stigma. At Garozzo funeral home, the social distance - both performed and articulated highlights the impact this "audience," an audience not only different but "lower" than their Italian American audience.

At Garozzos, the connection between culture (specifically, ethnic cultural identity), "audiences" (the Italian Americans with whom they identified and the Caribbeans they served) and the interplay of status and stigma was unmistakable. For the funeral directors, there was a palpable, spoken,

unspoken, pervasive sense that they lost status - among their peers, their own sense of their work, as they quite profitably served Caribbeans.

I asked Tony about the low turnover. The only person who ever quit Garozzos, he told me, quit because of the change in clientele. "Chris, a German guy. He worked here when it was Italian. When it changed, he just couldn't take it. It was too much, so he quit. Now he's out in Staten Island at a Jewish funeral home. But really, he needs to be in middle America." "Yeah, the clientele. That's the only reason someone would leave here - if they wanted to work with a different kind of people."

Joe took funeral directing seriously, earnestly attending continuing education classes. He had years of experience, working at multiple funeral homes, including some well known places. His experience, his seriousness, was suspect - used as evidence of something "wrong." "He was at that fancy place in Greenwich Village with the ballers - and now he's here? Something's just not right." Steve thought the only reason he was still there after three months was because Joe needed the work. He had three kids, a fourth on the way and "He's got no where else to go. He's been to six places in 10 years? This is the last stop."

In the interview, Steve regularly emphasized the long hours, that the money was good, but the work was hard. Over the course of fieldwork, it was clear - in word and action - that it wasn't just the long hours or the hard work. It was the new population that wore him out. Since "this place has turned black, it's taken the wind out of my sail." I asked what he meant. "Do you think I like working with these people?" Steve didn't. Neither did the other funeral directors at Garozzos. They all talked about leaving, getting out. They too, would rather work with a different kind of people. Michael

described lying in bed, "staring at the ceiling, thinking, I don't want to go to that fucking place." Steve says he has a similar response, almost every day. He's just "sick of it" - the people, the bullshit.

For funeral directors, there are advantages to having distance from your customers - even not caring. Distance helps with the emotional toll of daily work with death. Howard, who's worked with Steve for over a decade, told me: "Steve changed... He used to be totally nuts. Would bust your balls all the time. He's more laid back now." Why would Steve be more relaxed? During that period, the workload nearly tripled. That didn't sound relaxing. Howard "didn't want to speculate." Then he speculated: "It's like he came to terms with the fact that he wasn't an Italian funeral director anymore and, well, he just relaxed." He doesn't care as much.

Distance also helps with the financial side of the business. Profiting from grief is easier when you don't know the people. You can be more business like. Tommy is a full-time firefighter out on Staten Island, occasional funeral director at Garozzos, a freelance guy. While Howard did Rose Rizzo's hair and makeup (Rose, Tommy's relative), he fantasy planned his own future fortunes in the funeral industry. He used to work on Wall Street and still has a mind for bigger money. He could make big money if he owned a funeral home. He'd open it here in Canarsie or maybe Staten Island. He'd prefer Staten Island "You know, cause there are better people." But Canarsie was tempting. I'd heard Tommy talk enough about blacks that I was surprised. Why Canarsie? "The business, the volume, the demand. And it would be easier. You don't have to give them the same kind of service." I asked what he meant. He pointed to Rose, "Like this funeral.. No, bad example, this family will pay before the service cause that's the way they are." [Rose is the sausage family matriarch, the crazy/ exceptional Italian family that used Garozzos. But I think that story is way later now] He started over.

You don't have to give them the same kind of service. In this neighborhood, people got to pay or there's no funeral. But if it was people I knew? Let's say we have the funeral on a Thursday, I'd wait a week, let them kind of have some time, then send the bill. It's different if you don't know the people. You gotta get the money up front.

But he won't be opening a funeral home in this profitably distant market. Tony and his partner have the resources to run anyone else out of it. Tommy explained, "They got so much money, they can just low ball me out of business." "They'd kill me," he said. Tommy imagined a scenario where one of these guys, specifically Tony, died. Mike Lanzo, Tony's partner, would sell Garozzos, keeping the funeral homes that serve primarily Italians. Lanzo, like other funeral directors in the Garozzo orbit, would be willing to sacrifice the profit to not service this population.

It is the busiest funeral home catering to Haitians - and Caribbeans generally - in Brooklyn. And there are a lot of Caribbeans in Brooklyn, but little competition for this lucrative funeral market. Most funeral homes have local competition, at least one, if not multiple funeral homes within the neighborhood. Garozzos does not. Garozzos is the most geographically isolated funeral home in New York City.

The isolation is far from a coincidence. It was a strategic, possibly strong arm strategic, plan. The Garozzo guys were matter of fact about how Tony secured a near monopoly on Brooklyn's Caribbean funerals. "We own the two other funeral homes in the area. We closed the other two. So we kind of cornered the market." Michael: "We have no competitors. Tony bought out three funeral homes nearby. Closed two. Kept Barones." Barones, about two miles away, is the nearest "competition" and Tony owns it. Barones also does Caribbean funerals-fewer Haitian, more Guyanese, Trinidadian and Jamaican. Steve marveled at this situation during our first interview:

Now think about two miles in the city of New York. You know how many people live within two square miles in New York City? Shhh! Don't tell nobody we're here. We're in the armpit of the city. We don't want anyone to know. Tell Professor Bearman, "Don't write our name." People don't even know we exist.

People do know Garozzos exists. And they know that Caribbean funerals are a lucrative market. Some of these people, funeral directors, investors, might be interested in penetrating the Caribbean market. They, like Tommy, may also know enough to stay away. That said, Tony does not have a complete monopoly on the Caribbean funeral market.

On one of my first forays into Brooklyn funeral homes, long before I made it way out to Canarsie, I stumbled upon One of my first In Flatbush, the best known Caribbean neighborhood in Brooklyn - there's a funeral home that Tony does not own.

Maguires Funeral Home does brisk business in what Tom Mack, the manager, described as "The West Indian trade." Mack is a fourth generation Irish American funeral director. He grew up over his great grandfather's funeral home in Park Slope - where generations of his family served a largely Irish American clientele. His sibling is a prominent figure in the New York funeral world. Like Steve, Mack celebrated certain aspects of Caribbean culture. "They're wonderful people. They're very classy. They all come dressed. Their kids are immaculately dressed. The kids don't run around."

In terms of his own sense of status, he said:

They treat the funeral with respect and they look at me as a professional. Quite frankly, they treat me better than the white people around here do. I have no problem with them. I love them dearly. They're great people. I've made a lot of good friends with them.

Why are some funeral homes struggling? [Howard]: "Here in Brooklyn? It's cause the neighborhood changes. And you know, the guy's been doing Italian work for forty years, you don't want to

change." He turns to Eddie: "You know, like Maguires. They almost went under. They wanted to stay Irish and Italian. But now they're doing Caribbean work. And they're doing good."

Working there: Friday nights.

Fridays are the busiest nights at Garozzos - often with five simultaneous services, crowding more than the stated building capacity of 550 people. Five simultaneous wakes would overwhelm many funeral homes, at Garozzos, they've had weeks, at least, to prepare. While Fridays were the busiest, the work of the funeral directors was in some ways, the lightest. There's additional staff, three of the full time-funeral directors, plus an "extra" from one of Tony's other places, plus two parking attendants and an all purpose guy.

In the hour or so before the viewings begin, the cd of truly forgettable background music is piped through the lobby. It will stay on throughout the night, but by 7pm, no one will be able to hear it. All five chapels have sound systems, microphones, CD players. Often, there was live music - anything from an organist or trumpets to full church choirs and steel drums.

The main work of the funeral director during visiting hours is: Standing and pointing visitors to the correct chapel. Over the course of the evening, hundreds of visitors will find their way to the appropriate chapel by checking the chapel directory at the door, finding the name outside the chapel, or following people they recognize. But others will get assistance from a conspicuously stationed funeral director... if they get there early. This was most diligently practiced early in the evening, it peaked during Tony's nightly visit and dropped off precipitously as soon as he left.

The basic interaction was straightforward. The funeral director asked, "Who are you here to see?" The visitor gives a name. The funeral director will say Chapel A-E and point in the direction. A handful of visitors will not know the name of the person they're there to see. To resolve the confusion, the directors usually start with some demographic questions. "Man or woman?" "Young or old?" Gender can be more helpful than age. Most nights, race – even nationality – is the least helpful. I often milled with the funeral directors. Stationed at the door, I encountered the nationality confusion one night walking through the questions. A young woman didn't know who she was there to see. Man or woman? She wasn't sure. She knew the person was "old." She paused, and offered hopefully helpfully... "and Haitian." Eddie, eavesdropping, swooped in and, almost giddily, told her: "They're all old and Haitian!" then wandered off laughing at his own wit.

The main office is tiny. With a single desk, filing cabinet against the wall, and two "visitor's" chairs opposite the desk, there was little room to move around. And yet, this was the activity hub for Garozzos. Saturday mornings, the office served as dispatch headquarters. Friday nights, it served more as a clubhouse and bunker.

As the number of people and the volume increased, the funeral directors presence decreased. There was little interaction between the funeral directors and the attendees at the wake. Most nights, all of the funeral directors will hole up in the small office, door closed, for the entire night. Crammed into the office, a few basic questions organized the night What are we eating? This is the most talked about question of the night. It starts making the rounds as soon as Steve leaves. buzzing among the staff often as soon as Steve leaves. The dinner is authorized (and paid for) – but food and beverages are not permitted in public areas of the funeral home by New York State Law. They were supposed to eat in the break room, in shifts. Crammed into the office was the routine, boisterous, door closed,

nearly blocking out the hundreds of Caribbeans, the clamor, the activity that was the other 95% of the building.

In 2011, the State of New York forced Garozzos into the computer age. The Department of Health mandated electronic filing of death certificates. Steve was forced to accept not only a computer, but one with an internet connection. When Steve was in the building, the computer was just a death certificate filing machine. As soon as he left, it was pure entertainment. Each funeral director had some hobby he researched on the internet. For Michael, it was boats; for Howard, cars, Nate, skateboarding. But Fridays, with 6-8 of them crammed into the office, the clubhouse, individual hobbies were overruled in favor of shared interests, a semi-democratic process. *You Tube* Videos usually won out - most of clips were racially or sexually explicit. Nate was a first generation Haitian from Canarsie - a full time off the books employee, musician, pothead, and avid skateboarder. Nate watched skateboarding videos. When Howard walked in and grumbled, "Put on something we'd all want to watch." Nate smiled broadly, and without missing a beat, quipped: "No one would object if I had on KKK videos."²¹ He didn't wait for a response or a reaction, just smiled and asked, "What do you want to watch?" Eddie was ready with his request: "Top 60 Ghetto Black Names". Nate typed it in and we spent a good 20 minutes watching a YouTube video of white men reading off names like "Laquirishia" before moving on to to shit white people say, shit black people say, shit staten islanders stay.

When people needed assistance, they would usually tap on the bank teller style window separating the office and the lobby. Others would try to ask the question through the window. They would get waved into the office where one of the directors will ask "what can I do for you?" Most of the

²¹ And he wasn't even in the office for the night's KKK computer project! (Eddie photoshoping Chris's face onto a KKK grand wizard image.) KKK themed topics were more common than I guessed.

requests were small and easily accommodated. "Are there more tissues? Can someone turn up or down the volume/ heat/ lights in a chapel? Can someone fill out an attendance letter?" The request for additional chairs in a chapel was the one consistent no.

Repasts and Social Distance: The centrality of race for defining "own"

The funeral directors at Garozzos were often invited to the repasts by Caribbean families. In three years, I never heard that a funeral director accepted. Initially, I didn't make much of the Garozzos declinations. I imagined if my family ever had funeral home funeral, inviting those who organized it would be the polite thing to do. I figured the invitations were a formality, a polite gesture on the part of the clients. At the same time, I saw a stark contrast with the two other funeral homes I studied - where attending the repast was the default. One funeral director went so far as to strongly encourage repasts at the funeral home (which, yes, was illegal). Some funeral directors I interviewed not only attended repasts, but also family reunions, baptisms and graduations - interactions not unlike those Steve had in Corona.

In November 2012, events forced me to rethink the significance of declined invitations. Repasts, and the decision to attend them or not became an example of the distance between the Italian American funeral directors and the Caribbean population they served. The depth of this distance surprised me. The funeral directors at Garozzos did not attend the service or the repast for family of "one of their own." By "own," I mean one of the other full time funeral directors, an integral, even beloved, part of the funeral home.

In the interview, Steve told me that this was a Caribbean funeral home run by four Italian American funeral directors. Technically, this is true. There are four Italian American licensed funeral directors

at Garozzos. Steve didn't mention that there was a fifth full time funeral director on staff - one who is neither licensed nor Italian. Eddie Green is half-black. His Guyanese father married a local Canarsie woman, Eddie's mother. She died of a drug overdose years ago.

Eddie's father and sister were found dead in their Ohio apartment. Eddie has been with Garozzos full time for more than a decade climbing the ladder parking and odd jobs to funeral director. [fn]. His father, Cyril, and his younger sister, Gina, were flown to New York for a funeral at Garozzos. For weeks, the funeral for Cyril and Gina dominated office conversation. Everyone was involved. Eddie and Joe were both what the industry would call "body guys" - responsible for the low level body tasks like removals. Steve figured it was best to send Joe, not Eddie, to LaGuardia to pick up the bodies. Howard, of course, was responsible for the embalming. In this case, it was preserving, rather than actual embalming. Given the circumstances of their deaths and the time lapse, they were too far decomposed to consider an open casket - even with the services of an "expert" embalmer like Howard. Over the past months, Eddie regularly asked me to review (read: heavy edit, sometimes rewrite) essays for his online law enforcement program, so I was tasked with writing the program and the obituary. Howard and Dennis designed and produced the programs.

Eddie spent hours talking about his plans for the repast. He booked the basement / community center of a church (he occasionally attended). It was three blocks from the funeral home. "Who was doing the catering?" Howard wanted to know. Green Mountain, a Caribbean restaurant. "Yes, Howard, I'm having some jerk chicken and fried chicken. Half my family is Caribbean you know." As the three of us sat in the office, Eddie made a list of the alcohol he'd need. Obviously, since there would be Caribbeans, he would have rum, orange juice, Bristol Cream. He'd have to order wine too - even though Shanique (his American born black fiancée) would be the only one drinking

it. Eddie was working on accommodating the needs of the other non-Guyanese he expected to attend - that is, what would the funeral directors (and I) be drinking? He knew what Howard drank and told him "Yes, Boo-Boo²², I'll have vodka for you." As for me, I long ago learned Eddie didn't limit his broad ethnic generalizations to Caribbeans²³, so was not surprised when I wasn't asked, but told cheerfully that he would be sure to order whiskey "for the Irish."

How would he know how many people to expect? Unlike most catered milestone events (birthdays, baptisms, weddings), there is no RSVP for a funeral or a repast. This calculation seemed especially complicated. On one hand, Eddie's father moved out of the neighborhood long ago and, well, was not well-liked when he was in the neighborhood (to put it mildly). On the other hand, Cyril came from a large family (seven siblings) and had nine children of his own. These details, overwhelming my brain, were not the circumstances Eddie used to estimate attendance; his calculations were based on Caribbean community. "You gotta understand - these are Guyanese people. They hear there's gonna be free food and alcohol and everyone's gonna show up." As he refrained this lesson throughout the week, I realized, as much as the Garozzo guys schooled me on the behaviors, misbehaviors, beliefs, traditions, of Caribbean funerals, I had heard nothing of a critical component of the cultural event - the repast. Why not? Because no funeral director ever went. culture of the funeral itself, but right, no one ever talked about the repasts - because no one ever went.

The day of the service, funeral directors turned out in force - directors from Tony's four other funeral homes, freelancers who take weekend jobs at Garozzos, drivers from M&G, the contracted limo company. More than 30 men (all men), mostly Italian-American, all white, in black suits, black

²² There was lots of familiar referencing/ teasing around Howard's homosexuality. Danny, prone to sexualize everything, was the most consistent, but everyone played on it at some point.

²³ It mostly was, but when presented with the opportunity to deploy any stereotype, Eddie took it.

driving coats began arriving at 4pm, the start of visiting hours. The funeral personnel all came out to “pay their respects” to one of their own. It’s the right thing to do. They offered condolences, talked some shop, joked around. Each signed the book.

Eddie’s family began arriving at 5; the service was scheduled for 5:30. By 5:15, only the funeral directors on duty: Michael, Paulley and Joe, remained. Michael and Joe refused to attend the service. Paulley and I went. After the service, I stopped in the office to pick up my bags. Michael wanted to know how it went. I couldn’t tell him - it was painful to watch and Michael, who hated Cyril, might’ve relished it. I didn’t tell him that when the minister opened the floor to comments, imploring people to keep it to two minutes (that rarely works), that not a single person, in this crowded room made a sound. Finally, Cyril’s brother stood and read quotes from the bible. Nothing about Cyril. No one else spoke. Awkwardly, he waited through the silence until, unable to keep people longer he said: "Going once, going twice..." and finished that with a prayer.

And no one from Garozzos - not Howard, Steve, Michael, Tony, Joe, - none of them - attended the repast. They looked a little surprised when I headed out, but the only comments were about my safety walking the three blocks from the funeral home to the Church.

It’s different when it’s your family, right?

Two months later, Steve’s mother-in-law died.

The proceedings for Antoinette were very different. That Friday, I walked into an eerily quiet Garozzos. The directors barely looked up. Eddie took me by the arm, escorted me downstairs. The place was on "red alert," he told me. "All hands on deck." The only other time I got any kinds of heads up when I walked in the door was when Eddie’s father and sister died. This time was

different. The death of one of their own was really one of their own - not only related to one of the funeral directors, but own as in Italian. Antoinette's death was not a surprise - she was 91 and in hospice - but it felt like an emergency. Everyone was on edge, skittish, cautious, walking on eggshells, anxiously waiting for marching orders from Steve. The rhythm, the routine was all out of whack.

Roles were disturbed. For the first time, Steve was not sitting at his desk. For Antoinette's removal he and Michael were out on the removal - a task usually delegated to a lower ranking staff member, a "body guy" - like Eddie or Joe. Michael returned from Queens with marching orders from Steve - and in full "funerals are serious, this is serious" taskmaster mode. None of the usual casualness (never mind the crassness) would be tolerated. He made this explicit preemptively to Eddie - the youngest, most rambunctious. When he heard Eddie laughing about something, Michael stopped him. "It's different when it's your family. Right? When your mom died, was there any joking around? No. And even with your dad, I said my one thing, then that was it. No joking." It's true there was no joking when Eddie's father and sister died (except from Eddie), but this wasn't just "no joking" - this was anxious, serious.

Steve put Michael in charge - even in the embalming room, - where everyone knew Howard was the expert. But word from Steve was: "Tell Howard no ten minute special." Michael promised to supervise the embalming. Howard was already suited up - that is, gloved up and bloody apron over his undershirt and dress pants when Michael and I arrive. There's already a crowd: Howard, Eddie, Tony, Tony Two Beers. Michael took off his shirt. As he rummaged through the supply cabinet for a fresh apron, Eddie called, "You know you better re-use that." Michael shrugged, "It makes no difference to me when it's those niggers." I saw no difference in Howard's approach. Maybe he

spent more time washing her down, maybe he did more injections. Certainly he used a lower index fluid but that's a practical distinction. Howard is consistent, and in charge. Michael played a weak second fiddle. When he tried to help - slowly injecting embalming fluid to her nose - even I could tell he was not as good as Howard. Howard stood back until he was exasperated, grabbed the syringe from Michael, "You have no fucking confidence in your embalming skills" efficiently and skillfully injecting her face.

Tony Two Beers - officially the parking attendant - was the most vocal supervisor in the embalming room. When Michael and Howard transferred her from the stretcher to the embalming table Tony yelled "Careful!" When they began embalming, Tony couldn't even watch. "This is getting to me," he groaned as he covered his eyes. Eddie pointed out that this wasn't Tony's first embalming. "This is an old Italian lady. It's sadder. I don't give a fuck about those niggers."

Tony didn't rein in the racism - ... which I might expect him to, given I was there. He did, however, police the sexism. After the second blow job joke (Eddie can end any story with a blow job gesture, much greater range than I ever imagined), Tony stepped in with the (not unusual) "we have a lady here" warning to Eddie. Eddie offered his usual defense, "She's one of us now." That I was an outsider was absolutely clear on the gender front. They joked for a while about the near impossibility of a sexual harassment problem at Garozzos. Then, finally, I'd say, someone joked about me being undercover - in this case, for the FBI (not, presumably the more relevant agency, the Bureau of Funeral Directing). Tony was never concerned about my access. He was incredibly generous. That particular night he responded with - Good thing we do everything by the books here." From my observation, this was, for the most part, true.

Embalming complete, Eddie asked, "Should we put a tag on her?"

Michael: Yeah, bro. Do everything by the book. Fuck knows what Steve's gonna flip out about. And god forbid we get another white person in here.

Eddie: "Yeah right. That's not gonna happen."

Michael: "I bet she'd be turning over in her grave if she knew we were bringing her to the jungle to be embalmed."

Michael spent the rest of evening calling other funeral homes to find a place for her services. Antoinette's funeral, of course, would not be at Garozzos. There was a contamination of even embalming her there.

It was normal, expected, that Eddie's funerals would be at Garozzos, but Garozzos was Garozzos was not "good enough" for Antoinette. But the line wasn't drawn only around family members - Italian American family members. The funeral directors at Garozzos did not expect *any* Italian would consider their workplace good enough for a funeral. The fact wasn't brought up much - not many opportunities arose. It was an established fact that I learned while asking Steve about florists. It was one of those rare moments where Steve closed the door before answering a question. Back in the day, he told me, when Tony first purchased Garozzos (with some financial backing), he was called in for a meeting, a "sit-down" to use his words. The outcome of which was: funerals at Garozzos would use [] Florist. In return, Bayside would "send business" back to Tony. Steve was quick to remind me that Tony owns five funeral homes. So "sending the business" didn't mean they'd send it to Canarsie. "They're Italian," Steve explained, "so we'd have to do it at one of the other locations. Tony's other locations serve Italians.

Steve's friends, family, colleagues, the people he does business with will not use his funeral home. There is a contamination, a stigma, a degradation of the status of the funeral home because of the location and the population it now serves.

“Crazy” and “normal” funerals

One Friday, Tony apologized that I came all the way out there and I wasn't getting to “see anything.” It was unusually quiet, but it was also early and already I'd seen Howard embalm a body. This got everyone excited - the “crazy things” that happen at Garozzos (read: crazy Haitian stuff) was a regular routine. What struck me was the restraint they showed in front of Tony. For months, I'd heard about the “crazy” things that happen at Garozzos: voodoo requests, rituals, superstitions, mourners “falling out” or throwing themselves into the grave. In Tony's presence, they kept it to platitudes, vague references, few details. Matt comically pulled out the ledger of funerals and turned the pages, pointing like he was reading to school kids. “See all the ones in red?” They were all red. “Those are the psycho ones.” This got a good laugh from the funeral directors - of course they were all red. Red, in their paper accounting system meant past and paid.

There was one funeral that they could discuss in (disparaging, cause that's what crazy is) detail. They could discuss it because Tony brought it up. And why Tony thought this one okay to bring up is also speculatively significant. This one funeral, or rather, the multiple funerals of one family - the Rizzos - were discussed for years. The Rizzos ran a traveling sausage stand and were among the Canarsie Italians Howard described as “the last holdouts.” Unlike the families of the directors, their Italian American social circle, Tommy's extended family continued to live in Canarsie and use Garozzos after “it changed.” Tommy Rizzo did not. He moved to Staten Island, worked full time as a firefighter, and part time as a funeral director at Garozzos. So when Tony brought up the specifics of the Rizzo funerals, the “gossiping” was sanctioned. This was the first (then often repeated, but only), Italian-American “crazy.” ...as animals even (a description they often applied to Haitians). - the gaudiness (“you should've seen the arrangements - one was a full sized sausage stand, plugged in

and everything! Another was a sausage piece"), the fighting (one melee broke the glass door, ambulances and hundreds of dollars of damage).

I missed the funerals themselves, but I was there for Rose Rizzos dressing and casketing. Because she was white²⁴, Howard did her hair and makeup. He kept a toolbox full of cosmetics in the trunk of his vintage sports car (he was a car show regular). It was well stocked, but Rose required extra. She wore her hair large and stiff. Howard sent Nate out for Aquanet. Nate, not a child of the 1980s, had no idea what this product was, while Tommy, Howard and I, children of the 80s, described it with that.... Rose Rizzo was the matriarch of the Rizzo family, according to Tommy. According to the Garozzo guys, she was also the real "problem." Buried in a red sequined gown, black bra straps exposed²⁵, her funeral was the tamest, most "dignified" of the Rizzo family funerals. No fighting, no sausage stand, nothing out of the ordinary. "I think she was really the problem, don't you, Michael? They really were better this time."

Tony closed the conversation with an assurance to me, "You know, most of the families we have, they're good people. Nothing out of the ordinary happens. But once in a while, it's good to see some variety." He put on his trench coat, said his goodbyes, walked to the exit and turned back. He had one last thought for me. He took off his hat, "We're very different when we're on stage. You're getting to see the backside of this, but when we deal with families, we're very professional. You should make sure you come and see us." Michael waved off Tony's concern that I might think them anything but professional. "No, no, of course Tony," he said soothingly, "She knows. She's seen us

²⁴ It is common to have separate cosmetologists, one for white, another for black hair and makeup.

²⁵ When I pointed these out to Howard he paused, looked at me blankly - or deadpan, that's how he was, hard to read at least, "Well, that's how she'd wear it." Cultural, class insensitivity presumption on my part.

working. She's come out on funerals and they've all been pretty normal ones so far." Tony seemed satisfied, mumbling "Good. Good," as he put his hat back on and left for real.

One day: front stage and back

Saturday, February 4th, I went out on a "normal" funeral with Michael. Nothing crazy happened. Michael was "on stage." It was funeral directing professionalism that would make Tony proud. The day's professionalism, however, was preceded by a morning of the most unsettling backside of the funeral home.

Saturday mornings, funerals went out. Stationed behind his desk, Steve coordinated the operation while reading the morning papers - *The Post* and *The Daily News*. He assigned who went out on what funeral, which limo driver was assigned to which funeral director, which chapels needed immediate turnover, answering calls for directors. It was like Grand Central - people in and out, some staying to chat, others hustled off for immediate departure. I usually sat with Steve watching it unfold, chatting with whoever came by, until he assigned me a funeral.

One Saturday, Steve was particularly talkative. He often would rattle off news headlines as he skimmed the paper, but on February 4th, there was only one news headline worth talking about: Ramarley Graham. He was the unarmed 18-year-old shot by New York City Police the afternoon of February 2nd. As soon as Michael walked in, Steve looked up: "You hear about this guy in the Bronx?" Michael took the seat next to me, "You mean the kid shot by the police?" Steve looked back down at his paper. "You know they did a public service." Neither of responded. Steve looked across his desk - at us? At me? At Michael? "I'm serious. Save the city money down the road." Now this young black man wouldn't be a burden on the taxpayer - for welfare, jail, crime, babies.

Michael didn't comment on the case specifically, but complained about general decay of New York. Michael, like the others, was South Shore Brooklyn born and raised - but in a "fancier" neighborhood than Bensonhurst or Gravesend. He was from Mill Basin - this "rich kid" that Tony sent over got a chill from the others at first. He still gets some shit about being privileged, but they all make good money now. Michael, still in Mill Basin, owned his house, had a pool, and docked his baby, his boat, at a Brooklyn marina. He wanted more, specifically, he wanted "out of this fucking city." He often talked about getting out - moving to Arizona or Nevada. This time, it was Florida. Steve approved of Florida, it would be a good move. We were nearing the end of the foreclosure crisis, but there were still plenty of beachfront condos Michael could get "for real cheap." Steve was quiet for a minute, then changed his mind. No place, not even beachfront Florida was really safe, protected from "decay" under the Obama administration. "You don't know who's gonna end up next door. With the economy, they're gonna have to make all these fancy condos into Section 8 housing." Steve put the housing crisis squarely on Obama. When Michael suggested that maybe it wasn't all on Obama, since "the economy's been struggling for a while" Steve scoffed dismissively and looked annoyed. Eddie took the tension out of the air, as he often did, with a joke. He chided Michael, who he knew was no Obama fan (to put it mildly), "This is coming from you, Mr. Grand Dragon?" This got a big laugh out of Steve, "Yeah, Michael, where's your white sheet?" Michael laughed and restored balance, "It's in the laundry."

Steve turned and asked me about the previous night. I made two observations - both which, in previous conversations, were held up as examples of the Caribbean "respect" for funerals. On this morning, almost any comment, no matter how innocuous, was headed in one direction: a dislike of non-whites. First, I mentioned the crowds. It was wall-to-wall people - even though there were

“only” three services instead of the usual five. This morning, the turnout wasn’t a sign of respect, it was an opportunity to “other” to disparage, to dump on Caribbeans. It was crowded? Well, that’s how they live. "These people are used to crowded conditions - three or four families in one house, all big families too." I should go out on a home removal. This way I could see for myself “how these people live.” How do they live? I didn’t ask. Steve kept going, "They live like animals. You gotta go on one of these. You don’t need to touch anything." He reminded Michael about that one place, “When we had to take a shovel to move the trash out of the way." He explained to me, "Sometimes there’s no light – all the bulbs are out or missing. You can’t see anything - there’s your loved one laying in the dark? It’s disgusting!" I asked if this was an elderly shut-in, but he assured me, "Oh, no. It’s all over this place."

My next (and last) comment about the evening, the formal dress, was a point of praise from our first interview. But that Saturday, hundreds of hours into my fieldwork, it elicited an explicit and extended description of “nigger rich.” The abbreviated description: Caribbeans live in squalor and waste money on expensive clothes.

Finally, I was getting out of the office and the conversation - I had my assignment. I was with Michael for the day. This was usually the case. I don’t know for sure - but I assumed this was because Michael was the best “face” of Garozzos. Steve once told me Michael was “wasted” at Garozzos - he was attractive, charming, a good salesman, good with people. He should be at a place like Campbells. As Michael and I left for the “Cypress Hill job,” Steve called out, "You know, Kris, we’re not prejudiced." This was the only time this disclaimer, one that often follows prejudiced statements, was used at Garozzos.

The Cypress Hill job - the burial of Mr. Morency at Cypress Hills - was one of the “normal” funerals I went out on with Michael. There was no voodoo, no falling out, no drama. Mr. Morency was a Haitian immigrant in his late seventies. After a brief service at Garozzos he would be buried at Cypress Hill in Queens. The Jackie Robinson, a noisy, major highway, cuts through Cypress Hills. Mr. Morency’s grave was right on that cut - down a steep hill, with only a chain link fence between the grave and the traffic. Highway noise made it almost impossible to hear anything, to figure out what was going on. I didn’t notice that Michael was disappeared until I saw him bounding down the hill. He brushed his way through the crowd around the back of the open grave where he clapped Mr. Morency’s brother on the back and announced (loud enough that I could hear him), “He wants to come.” Without waiting for a response, he bounded back up the hill - leaving behind the curious, confused crowd.

“He,” it turned out, was Mr. Morency’s 98-year-old father. The elder Morency was completely blind, incredibly frail. Climbing down the hill would be too difficult for him. The family decided he should wait in the limo. Somehow, he caught Michael, and despite the language barrier, conveyed that he wanted to be at his son’s graveside. When Michael reappeared, he was holding Mr. Morency around the waist, arms over each others shoulders, inching him down the hill. The short descent took more than 15 minutes with Michael talking the blind man through each tentative step. He was remarkably gentle and patient. Mr. Morency spoke some English - at least enough to repeat Michael’s instructions. "Stepping down." "Stepping down, yes." "Can you turn this way?" "Yes." "This is grass. Are you okay walking on grass? Feel this? It’s a little bumpy. A little hill now."

Once the father was seated comfortably by the grave, Michael joined me behind the crowd and the minister took over. From where we stood, I couldn’t hear the minister’s words - nor would I have

understood the Creole if I could. Michael went off to find the groundskeepers to let them know the family would be waiting for the grave closing. It can be a long wait. This was a cold day, the highway side location not particularly peaceful. The lowering and closing is a slow, unceremonious, clangingly industrial process. On top of the highway noise came the cranking of the lowering device, followed by the enormous, construction site sized backhoe.

Cold, uncomfortable, a little impatient, I asked Michael how often people wait for the grave closing. Of Caribbean differences, it's not a first order difference (like respect or delay) but it comes up, and I witnessed it often enough. [After attending dozens of Caribbean burials, it was common that mourners waited for the graves to be fully closed. However, I never saw anyone throw themselves onto the grave or otherwise "fall out" as so often had been reported.] Michael answered a different, not entirely unrelated (or insignificant, given the conditions) question. Maybe noticing my shivering, he heard "How long will they wait?" and told me with some exasperation, "They'll wait forever." A few left after the first shovels of dirt hit the grave. A handful, including the 98 year old, waits nearly an hour until the grave is filled, the ground is leveled and the backhoe pulls away. None of the mourners throw themselves on the grave.

While we waited, Michael explained some Caribbean funeral practices - like why they wait to have the grave closed. In Haiti, he explained, homeless people live in cemeteries so "these people" are worried that things will be stolen from the casket. That's why they wait. Really, the only way to secure a grave is with a vault, he told me. Then Michael surprised me - with his beliefs about burial and again when he made it personal. I discovered that Michael took funeral directing very seriously. He believed in funeral directing in the party line way - the "right way" to do things, the value of the

funeral - traditional in both the decorum, respect way and further - believing, to my surprise, even in some of the myths of the industry.

Vaults are one of these industry questionable “wants” - they were expensive and the claims made by the industry were undermined - primarily the claim that they prolonged preservation of the body. Even the most traditional of funeral directors I knew considered vaults a waste of money. But not Michael. For Michael, vaults were not a waste, but a necessity, a “right thing to do,” at least for “people like us.” “If you really care,” began Michael, “Or, you know, if you’re people like us, you use a vault.” His parents, of course, are buried in vaults. “Our” logic is different. It’s not about cemetery theft, it’s about preservation of the body. The purpose of a vault for “people like us” isn’t the Haitian purpose (protection from people), for people like us vaults protect our “loved one” from the earth, dirt, worms, decomposition.

Back in the hearse, we marveled at a 98 year old man outliving his child. Michael asked about my parents. We’d spent so much time together at this point, comfortably, informally, that I wasn’t surprised by the question, but I was taken aback by his formality.

Whereas Steve asked me bluntly in our first interview about my family and bluntly disapproved of our choices, Michael didn’t ask if we did the right thing for people like us (say, use a vault), not even if we had a funeral. Rather, he went into full funeral director mode. “Are both of your parents still with you?” When I tell him not my father, he went into full funeral director mode. “I’m sorry... When did he pass?” “That must’ve been hard since you were so young.” I was unsettled - not by the content of his questions, but by his suddenly distant, formal, official language: were they “with me,” “pass”, and, “I’m so sorry.” It felt rehearsed, scripted, like a performance of funeral directing. I was a

little surprised at first, but On the one hand, it felt like a performance of funeral directing, with the formality, some distance, the language. On the other, I'd also come to think that he believes the routine more than others - even while not necessarily happy (to understate it) about serving this particular clientele.

Michael illustrates the complexity of where and when the boundaries are drawn, the line of distance. There's Michael's professional mode, but more than that, the physical contact and comfort and how that contrasts with his articulated backstage sometimes virulent racism.²⁶ One night, as Michael applied makeup on an elderly Haitian woman, he blurted, "I hate these fucking niggers. Really, I do." This was not, by any means, the first time I'd heard the word at Garozzos. It was tossed around regularly, lightly, laughingly. But I was surprised to hear it so emphatic, dripping, and from Michael. Was I missing something? Did he hate them all the time? I asked. He paused a moment, softened a little and said, "There are a few nice ones. But every fucking day? I can't stand it."

The relationship, *his* relationship, to race and his role was more complicated than disdain. One night in the embalming room, Eddie was telling us about Steve and his lotto ticket. Mocking Steve, and his workaholic ways, he told us Steve would only work half time if he won. Michael thought that was "some bullshit." If Michael won, he would "quit this place" immediately, sit on his boat and drink the days away. Then he thought about Tony. If he quit, he would be "screwing" Tony. Michael couldn't just up and leave Tony in the lurch. Maybe he would buy out his time, give that money to Tony. He kept thinking and got excited. Better than buying out his time, he could pay for funerals, like six or seven of them. "I'd pick families that are nice" he said, "go through the arrangements with

²⁶ I judged him, and expect any reader (liberal and non-racist assumed) will judge him too. But it is more complicated and this physicality is important to that. Not every espoused non-racist could actually bridge the physical distance. Sure, most don't have the opportunity, either. This is a point Steve made explicitly. It was easy for people like me (presumably liberal, Obama supporting), to

them, then tell them it's free!" I knew Michael took funeral directing seriously, but this altruism struck me as odd. And faster than it came, the idea of altruism exploded as Michael laid out the *rest* of his plan. "First," said Michael, "I'd make them pose with me in a KKK hood, with their arms around me!" Eddie nearly choked with laughter. "You know they'd do it too!" Then, of course, Eddie managed to amplify the insult.....and, as was his way, brought it to sex. In a thick Haitian accent, Eddie said, "Oh, you need to fuck my mother in the ass? Sure! Sure! Anything for a free funeral!"

Unusual requests, legitimate wants, and status.

Funeral directors across New York City described their workplaces or their work in terms of race, ethnicity, or religion - of the owners/ employees or the customers. There are Italian funeral homes, Irish funeral homes, black funeral homes, Jewish funeral homes. When the owners and the customers were different along these categories, as is increasingly common in New York City, the funeral directors would usually describe the type of "work" the funeral home did - i.e. "Irish work," "Italian work," Caribbean work, Jewish work.

Funeral homes across New York City face the same question as Garozzos: what to do what the neighborhood changes? Should the funeral home move? Should they follow their "customers," or should (and can) they adapt to new customers? If so, what changes? Funeral directors make choices, judgments, and accommodations. Often, when there is racial or ethnic change in a neighborhood, small businesses undergo a similar, usually slower, change. Funeral homes are the slowest to change. They're a particular type of small business-often family owned, community based, and physically, difficult to relocate. As noted in *The New York Times*, "Funeral homes are often the last token of an ethnicity to remain in a neighborhood. Long after the delis, bakeries and restaurants have gone, the

funeral home remains" (Berger 1981). The outcome of this, according to some funeral directors, would be disappearance of the ethnic funeral home. As communities disperse, people will choose funeral homes by location, not ethnicity - whereas at one point, they were the same.

Mack, the Irish American working the "West Indian trade" explained:

This is a business of custom. If it's not for the customs then we don't exist. You know, by law we have to take somebody to the cemetery and we have to do this and that, but if we don't accommodate customs, we're out of business.

Mack's knowledge of customs has helped his business. A Hindu man was "shopping" for a funeral. Mack asked him what crematory he wanted to use, what pandit, if the participants would put the casket three times on the cloth or if they needed assistance. Mack said, "I amazed the guy, floored him." This clear demonstration of familiarity with Hindu funeral practices, won Mack the business. "He was shopping, but came back to me. I got that funeral."

Mack's distinction between legal expectations of funeral directors and cultural requests of funeral directors (customs) brings me to a surprise we found early on in the project. The initial interview protocol included a question about "unusual requests." This question came from reading academic and popular writing about the funeral industry. In industry terms, "unusual requests" were about event planning and personalization - themed funerals, the classic Harley in the funeral home example, shooting ashes into space, golf courses that doubled as memorial parks (bury your ashes near the 18th hole). We heard none of this from New York City funeral directors. "Unusual request" was understood by funeral directors, in almost every instance, to be a request from some other group's customs. In other words, "unusual" was other cultures. This was not what the literature prepared us for - which was fun, themed, personalized funerals.

Are there limits to what usual requests a funeral director can - or is willing to - accommodate? The directors I spoke to had different ideas of limits. Most told me about legal restrictions. I learned

from a Bronx funeral director that it's illegal to bury liquids. One woman wanted to have coffee in her casket. Liquid, not legal. So she was buried with a coffee cup. Another told me guns in the casket are illegal. Laws have changed too. Forty years ago, when Williams first became a funeral director, it was legal to bury people with pets. Once, he buried a "very prominent woman of the night" with her pet snake. Or people had their pets cremated and wanted the cremains buried with them. This is no longer legal. Cemeteries have more regulations now. Or, as Williams' partner, Susan, put it, "The cemeteries are set up for humans, and we used to allow this all the time, and now we have to be very careful because what happens when it comes time to put a name on the stone, if they're calling up and asking for permission for Fido or Fluffy or whatever, we're in trouble."

Most customs can legally be accommodated - with one frequently cited exception: food in the funeral home. Some groups include/ expect to have food and drink at the funeral. This is illegal (or was until 2016) in the state of New York. This may also explain something that perplexed me in interviews: New York funeral directors regularly brought up gypsies. Were there that many gypsies in New York City? A gypsy funeral, apparently, involves food and drink in the funeral home. And sometimes, according to some funeral directors, other issues. Antonio Madera, in Bushwick, would not have a gypsy funeral:

They want to have a party at the chapel - music, drink. That's trouble. They eat in the chapel. They dance in the chapel. They play music in the chapel. They break chairs. They fight. The gypsies are known for that. They spend big money, but you gotta' get it up front cause you're gonna make some repairs for chairs and everything.

According to Madera, no funeral home will allow a party with food and drink. Even if he knew of one that might, he wouldn't send a Gypsy family to another funeral home because they'd say, "What are you doing to me? You sent these people to me? Look what they did to my chapel!" No, No. I don't want enemies."

Of course, there are funeral homes that will bend the rules around food and drink. Mack at Maguires was one of the few I spoke to who accommodated the food, drink and partying of a Gypsy funeral. He even seemed to enjoy it. He had a solution to the rule-breaking involved: "Don't get caught, no witnesses." With a gypsy funeral, he said, "You get 'em in the funeral home, then you lock down the place. Don't let anyone in."

Gypsies came up remarkably often. When I asked Avery, for example, if she ever got unusual requests, she thought for a minute and

Nothing crosses my mind now. Basically we do a lot of Baptist, a few Catholics, Pentecostal. But I have some friends who buried gypsies and I understand that they work with a lot of fire.. We've never buried an Asian, but I saw them there at the cemetery and they burn all their flowers... [She kept thinking.] We basically do Baptists, Catholics, things like that. So, no, I can't think of anything weird.

Falco, a young, college educated fourth generation funeral director was diplomatic and thoughtfully accommodating:

Sometimes you do get what I would think of as odd requests. Sometimes these are cultural things, and you'd don't understand. A lot of times if I hear requests that I'm not familiar with, or that I've never seen before, I try to find out why people are asking that, you know I'm trying to find out the real reason why, because then I can try to please those people. Some things they'll ask about are feasible.

What "unusual request" will funeral directors NOT accommodate? Many explained the legal limits, legal boundaries of what they would do - but what about their own boundaries, their own sense of what's appropriate? What do they see as "boundaries" of appropriate? And what does it mean?

Hughes calls this evaluation of appropriateness a "legitimate want." Defining what is a legitimate or appropriate request, according to Hughes, is fundamental to a server's sense of professionalism. This

definition is also, importantly, subject to variation in circumstances – especially the relationship between the server and served. He writes:

The legitimacy of the want-and of the service to fulfill it--thus seems to lie partly in the nature of the difficulty, but also partly in the person, in his status, and the source of his troubles, and partly in the state of society. The *boundaries of legitimate want*, and of legitimate professional services are not fixed, but *tend to vary with time, person, and circumstance*. Within the limits of the legitimate, some activities, some services, and *services to some clients are more respectable and lend more prestige to the professional than do others*. (1970:153-4.)

Find-a-killer I: upside down

In the spring of 2012, Canarsie was covered in posters: “Cop Shot Any information? Call 1-800-COP SHOT.” There was a \$12,000 reward. Three weeks after 39-year-old Pierre Macombe, auxiliary police officer was shot dead a few blocks from Garozzos, he was buried by Garozzo funeral home. Despite the publicity - and the reward - there was little information about his murder - there were still no suspects, still no suspected motive.

This was the largest, most formal, in my time at Garozzos. He was buried with police honors - the NYPD has a specially trained honor guard – for guarding, saluting, and most strikingly, for shouldering, the casket. The streets were closed. Police and mourners lined the mile long procession from the funeral home to the Church. According to newspaper accounts, more than seven hundred people attended the funeral, including multiple politicians.

The moment of closing a casket is sensitive and handled delicately. When the time came to close the casket, Michael dismissed everyone - the NYPD honor guard and the roomful of attendees from the chapel. Only the immediate family - Macombe’s wife, brother, sister-in-law and aunt - were allowed to stay. From the rear of the chapel, I could not hear the brother’s request. Michael’s response, on

the other hand, echoed through the chapel: "Absolutely not. No. We cannot do that." He was terse, cold. It was tense. I left the chapel and went to the hearse to wait.

As the hearse inched through the mile of mourners on both sides of the street, I felt awkward talking with mourners staring into the hearse as we inched down the street to the church, but Michael was unfazed, his usual chatty self, so I asked: "What happened back there?" Michael shook his head as he told me: the brother wanted the body buried face down. I was stunned. Had anyone asked for that before? "No, but these people ask for all sorts of crazy things." People ask them to stab the corpse through the heart, "all sorts of crazy shit." They won't do it.²⁷ He sounded disgusted as he worked through the list. "These people practice voodoo. Who knows what crazy thing he had in mind." He doesn't think it would be illegal for him to do it, "But it's like, no, man, we're not doing that." Beyond "some voodoo shit," Michael had no idea what was behind the request.

The funeral directors regularly invoked culture to explain unfamiliar behaviors, practices, or requests of their Caribbean clientele. Because they used Voodoo explanations to cover all sorts of unfamiliar practices, I was dubious, but curious. So I went home and googled "face down burial voodoo." One of the hits was, "to find a killer."

On my next visit, I reported this finding to Michael. I wasn't sure if I should. Would he even be interested? Or annoyed that I was bringing it up? Luckily I had time alone with him. Tasked to pick up death certificates, he offered to drive me into Manhattan. Alone in his Porsche, I told him what I found. He was not only interested, he was excited. After securing my secrecy - specifically that I not repeat this to the guys at the funeral home - he surprised me. "I did it," Michael said. He buried

²⁷ During the standard embalming process, the heart is repeatedly stabbed (to remove fluid). I didn't think at the time to ask why they didn't mention this to those specifically making that request.

Franky Macombe upside down? Even after Michael's hard "No" - the one that drove me from the chapel, Macombe's brother kept asking. So, said Michael, I said to him "just promise me that I'm not doing something disrespectful. Promise me that." The brother promised that burying him upside down was not disrespectful. But he did not say what it *was* for. Reluctance. While he didn't want me to tell the guys, he already told Steve. Steve was unfazed. "If that's the worst thing you do around here, that's pretty good."

A week later, there was another "find a killer."

Find a killer II: naked

"She wants me to take his clothes off." "She" was the daughter of the deceased 84-year-old laid out in Chapel A. Her father was shot on a street in Port-au-Prince, Haiti three weeks earlier "for a gold chain." She asked Joe, the funeral director, to remove her father's clothes before closing the casket. Steve Sebbeto, the manager, lowered his *Daily News*, peered over his glasses, "They want to bury him naked?" "I believe so."

It was 8:30 on Saturday morning and, as usual, Garozzos was busy - four funerals due at Catholic Churches in Brooklyn between 9 and 10am. At 10am, there would be a memorial service in the funeral home for a 24 year old shot a week earlier on a street corner in Brooklyn. There were four hearses positioned at the service exits, awaiting caskets. Drivers, funeral directors and visitors milled around the building. Each of the full-time funeral directors was assigned to a funeral. Steve assigned the 24 year old's funeral to Tommy, a firefighter (and part-time funeral director) from Staten Island.

"You got the Pinelawn job. Service here, then Pinelawn²⁸." Tommy didn't request more information, but Steve offered his take on the story: "Kid was shot. Family says he was a real angel. Shot selling encyclopedias on the street."

Briefly, the request from Chapel A had Steve's attention. Shaking his head, he turned to me,

We buried a guy face down last week, did you hear this? Whatever they want to do – go ahead! You want to get buried face down? Sure! Naked? Why not? We'll do anything! Next they'll ask us to set them on fire... Unbelievable.

He pushed his glasses back and returned to his newspaper. Joe was new at Garozzos. He hesitated in the doorway. "I guess I should bring scissors?" Steve didn't look up. The funeral was due at St. Albans in a half hour. Michael, also annoyed with Joe, answered impatiently, "Yeah, Bro, come on, we're not undressing him. Tell the daughter you can do it, but you have to cut the clothes. And visiting needs to end now." Once Joe found the scissors and was out of earshot, Steve was ready to say more. He put down his paper and said sarcastically, "What? Am I gonna call the church? Oh, I'm sorry Father. We had to cut the guys clothes off. Can you maybe start Mass a little late? Only at this place!"

Michael turned to me: "Kris, you hear? It's another find-a-killer thing." I don't know how they figured this out. Did someone ask? I doubt the daughter willingly explained it to Joe. She was angry with him. She overheard him announce the request to the office.

After the first "find a killer" incident, Michael assured me that he/ they had limits on what voodoo requests they'd accommodate. When I asked if there was a funeral home that might be more accommodating/ comfortable with voodoo – like a voodoo specialized funeral home? It was only in retrospect that I thought about how many layers his answer contained. While he insisted that no, he

²⁸ Pinelawn is a cemetery out on Long Island. In the staging of departures at Garozzos, the funerals are commonly referred to by the destination – rarely by the decedent's name.

had not buried Mr. Macombe upside down, as he assured me that he/they had voodoo limits, he also said, laughingly (so maybe I didn't take him too seriously) "We are the Voodoo funeral home."

He went on:

I was telling Steve the other day, "Steve, you know we're not traditional funeral directors anymore. I mean, I hate to say it, but we're just ringleaders of this circus. "Oh, you want the body stripped? Okay, you want this? That? Okay. This way, that way."

Self defined limits

Sometimes, there are requests that may not be illegal, but that a funeral director may not be willing to do him/her self. Burying someone upside down, for instance, does not seem to be illegal. Michael at Garozzos knew of no legal restriction, but initially, he also said he "just couldn't do it." His reluctance to admit he did do it, at least before he understood the purpose behind it, suggests there was something about the request that crossed a line defined by his sense of right and wrong, not the law.

Patrice Wood, a funeral director in Bed Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, was also asked to bury a body upside down. She had a different solution to this "unusual request" - a solution that provided her some personal distance. The request was also made for a different reason. After a funeral, a man asked that she turn his wife upside down. Patrice told him that she "personally would not do it and my manager personally would not do it." But if he wanted to do it himself, he could. He did. "He flipped her face-down in the casket!" Afterwards, she said:

"Sir, can I ask you why you did that?" And he told me she was so evil that when he buries her, if she should wake up he doesn't want her to crawl her way up he wants her to crawl further down! Unreal! I've never experienced anything like that in my life. That was the weirdest request I've had in this business.

"You've got to have some boundaries. I told a family the other day "you got to find another undertaker. I'm not doing that." For some funeral directors, one of those boundaries is race.

Cipolla and Son funeral home in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, will not bury blacks. Ideally, they would only bury Italians.

Cipollas provides services almost exclusively for their "community." Over the course of a year and a half, I was aware of only one deceased with a non-Italian last name. This was remarkable enough to draw public comment. During her wake, a regular visitor stopped in to talk to Frank. Noting the deceased's name - Maureen Connelly - the visitor remarked, "What? You buried all the Italians and you gotta work for the Irish now?"

The Cipollas bury few, if any, of new [blonde, American, liberal] residents – though whether this is a function of exclusion by the Cipollas or preference on behalf of the "blonde people," it is hard to say. They will not cater to blacks, and only grudgingly serve Hispanic families.

They would not bury a black person. Again, given the neighborhood demographics, it's unlikely a black person would come to Cipollas. But it's not impossible. Peter told me directly that he would not put on a funeral for a black person. There is one full time employee at Cipolla and Son funeral home - JT. He's there by eight every morning and often works until nine or ten o'clock at night. JT is black. Would Peter have JT's funeral at Cipolla and Son? I asked. He told me "absolutely not. Not even if he died on site."

Is it legal to refuse? According to the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, no. But the Cipollas were not particularly concerned with the law. And there is a less direct, less illegal way of refusing to serve blacks than overt discrimination: pricing. The high profile Federal Trade Commission hearings of the 1970s culminated in a largely toothless set of regulations - with one exception: transparent pricing. Since the Funeral Rule of 1982, every funeral home must make their prices readily available. This means they must give detailed, itemized prices - over the telephone and have their General Price List (GPL) printed and available at all times.

The lack of publicly available pricing information was also how Peter “refused” to serve blacks - or anyone else he didn’t want to serve. He’d just give them an outrageous price... Their misdirection via pricing is also against a federal law - the Funeral Rule of 1982 - but this federal law is less known, understood, and weakly enforced. Cipolla and Son funeral home was the only one I entered that did not, at some point, give me a GPL. I never saw them give anyone a price list. In fact, I never saw a price list anywhere.

Downplaying, even hiding, the price information was consistent with the Cipolla’s approach to funeral directing, their focus on interpersonal relations, the “human factor.” They actively deemphasized the commercial aspects. When a local newspaper reporter asked Frank about the “business,” he corrected her "I don’t like to say business." It was a "family service, this profession, this life." Unlike other funeral directors, Peter and Frank rarely discussed costs, prices, numbers of any kind. Despite years there, I have almost no information about funeral costs at Cipollas.

Peter was frequently concerned about the finances of the funeral home. Their ledger of debts not paid by families goes back nearly fifteen years. Peter was critical of his father’s lack of concern

“about the books”, but resigned to the practice of extending credit to families. This practice, he explained, reflected his father’s relation to the work. Funeral directing was, for Frank “a life.” While Peter “does it with respect and reverence,” he was not like his father who “doesn’t care about the books, doesn’t care about the future, the balances. It’s his passion.” When for example, I pushed Frankie on how the neighborhood demographics were impacting the business, he said: “Look baby, I don’t look at statistics, I look at people... If we just look at numbers of funerals, we’ve failed.”

New York State Convention

The last time I saw Frank Cipolla was at the last place I expected to see him - at a funeral directors convention.

Conventions serve multiple purposes. In New York, funeral directors need twelve continuing education units (CEUs) biennially to maintain the license. With one weekend convention, a funeral director can cover all the required CEUS. They are also an opportunity to learn about new merchandise, to connect with new suppliers, make deals. They’re tax write offs. They’re social.

None of these interested Peter or Frank Cipolla. According to Peter, conventions were a waste of precious time. Why would he spend a whole weekend talking to funeral directors? The other day he went to DeKalb Avenue -less than half a mile away- and “lost a funeral.” Frank, it turns out, held the whole licensing system in contempt. Of twelve continuing education units, there is one required of all New York State funeral directors: Law with Debbie Orecki. Debbi Orecki is the one woman show that is the New York State Bureau of Funeral Directing. There are over 4,000 funeral directors in the State of New York. There is one Debbie Orecki. But Debbie knew Frank Cipolla by name. She’d been calling Cipolla and Son funeral home for weeks, telling Peter, “Tell your daddy he has to

come upstate and see me." When she reached Frank, she gave him an ultimatum – come to the convention, take her State Law CEU or he was going to lose his license.

And so it was that I found Frankie in a Poughkeepsie New York Hotel ballroom full of funeral directors. It was the last place he wanted to be. Frank is a charmer, center of attention, holding court kind of guy. At the convention, I almost didn't recognize him. Not only was he without his signature fedora, but he was sullen, quiet, keeping an unusually low profile. He didn't recognize me, I thought. Then I realized that he didn't want to be recognized. When we spoke, he was furtive and terse. He explained his situation, the calls to the funeral home, that Debbie threatened to take his license. Mumbling, "I've gotten away with it for so long," he abruptly ended our reunion, "Excuse me, I'm gonna hide before someone sees me." It was weird.

The New York Funeral Law CEU is an opportunity for the funeral directors to ask questions about regulations, for Orecki to explain what regulations are in the works and how existing ones are working. I attended the seminar twice over five years and there was a remarkable consistency in concerns: licenses, the ongoing problem of unlicensed funeral directors, prep rooms, pre-need accounts and liability. Mostly, it was cautionary tales from the field. As the Bureau's director, Orecki is the one who receives complaints from the public, reports from the FTC and the Consumer Protection Bureau. The biggest concerns were violations of the Funeral Rule. "The Rule, issued in 1984, requires funeral homes to provide consumers with itemized price lists at the start of any in-person discussions of funeral arrangements, caskets, and/or outer burial containers. It also requires funeral homes to provide price information by telephone on request" (FTC 2014).

Orecki regaled the audience stories of stings to encourage compliance. Compliance she regularly explained, she was not in a position to enforce. The Bureau of Funeral Directing, was, after all, this one woman operation. "One thing we don't do is unannounced inspections. We don't have anyone to do that. Sad, but true." The FTC and the Consumer Protections, however, do have the personnel to inspect and, according to their reports, they do so annually. In other words, it's mostly other - non-funeral directing - agencies that funeral directors need to watch out for. She emphasized the hefty fines levied by the FTC (\$1000 per violation!) and how easy it was to avoid them. "Paper your walls with your GPL!" The Price Lists are basically the single focus of federal "stings." She chided those funeral directors who "still protect their GPL like it's a trade secret." Several New York funeral directors have been brought before the FTC, she warned. She didn't mention specific cases, but there's a knowing-ness of the stories.

Orecki did receive a discrimination complaint, but it wasn't about race. A woman called a funeral home to preplan her funeral. At first, the funeral director was extremely solicitous -he picked her up from her home, held doors. All that stopped when she told him she wanted cremation. Then, according to Orecki, the funeral director "got surly. He didn't hold doors anymore." When Orecki received the complaint, she called the funeral home, the director in question was summarily fired. And guess what? The woman went to another funeral home and pre-planned an \$8,000 service. The lesson? The same one Kubasek and others have been teaching for years: there's money in cremation. Funeral directors need to stop assuming direct cremation.

Waiting for the MetroNorth at the Poughkeepsie station, I noticed Frank on the tracks. So thrown off by our interaction in the ballroom, I wasn't planning to approach him again. But he saw me and was back to Frankie Cipolla. I got a big smile and a kiss. I was "Beautiful," "Baby," and "Sweetie"

again. He sat with me on the train, his shower of compliments interrupted only by periodic checks that I was paying attention to the station stops. "Baby, you're watching for Ossining, right? I don't want to miss my stop." 'This whole convention nuisance would be worthwhile because could stop at Sing Sing (the state prison) to see a friend. "He'll be so happy to see me."

CHAPTER FOUR

The New York State Funeral Directors Convention was overwhelmingly white. Out of nearly three hundred funeral directors, four were African American. The whiteness of the convention was no surprise. In interviews, I routinely asked funeral directors what organizations they belonged to. Among African American funeral directors, in particular, this routine question brought the issue of race (already there, I'm white), directly into the conversation. It was the acronyms and my unfamiliarity with them that often forced it; they all sounded the same to me. There's the NFDA, the NFDM&A, the NYSFDA. Even if they gave the full name, I'd struggle: the National Funeral Directors Association, the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association, The New York State Funeral Directors Association, The Metropolitan Funeral Directors Association, The Empire State Funeral Directors Association. There was a benefit to my slow learning. As I stumbled with the acronyms, the "answer" would be given to me in shorthand: the NFDA was the "national," the NFDM&A was the "black national." The distinction was one of the first things I learned on this project, thanks to Francine Hart, my first interview. She was a member of the "black national" and one of its auxiliaries-100 Black Women in Funeral Service. She was not a member of the NYSFDA or the NFDA. So, while I was not surprised by the whiteness of the convention, I was surprised to meet Ms. Hart there.

Sometimes, conversation about race and segregation required no particular question. For LC Willis race was central to any question I over the three hours we spent in her home. She parsed "the different worlds" of black and white funeral directing-starting with the associations:

You have a local black, a local white. You have a state black, a state white. A national black, a national white. It's unbelievable. We intertwine some but we're separate, totally separate. And it's unbelievable that there's so much segregation in the funeral industry and no one ever points it out.

Maybe no one pointed it out the segregation because it was so obvious within the industry. For example, the week before the New York State convention in Poughkeepsie, I asked the funeral directors at both Garozzos and Armstrongs if anyone was going to the convention. I was hoping for company. The answer was 'no' at both places, but the question was understood differently. At Garozzos, the Italian American run Caribbean funeral home, they asked if I meant the NFDA or the NYSFDA (both white). I clarified, not that it really mattered-they weren't going to either. For Garozzos, conventions were a waste of time. What could they learn? They were making as much money as they could. Certainly more than most funeral homes. At Armstrongs, the African American funeral home in the South Bronx, the convention was the black national. They really wanted to go-but it was in Las Vegas — too expensive for any of them. When the convention brochure tuned up that summer, they thumbed ever page, who they knew, what sounded fun. They were disappointed.

Until 1963, the NFDA limited membership to "members of the white race." In 1924, Black funeral directors formed their own association-the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association (NFDMA). Of course associations are now officially open to everyone. In reality, they are segregated at every level. This segregation was on full display at the state and national conventions of 2012. At the New York State convention, there were only four non-white attendees. At the NFDMA (the black national) convention, there was only one white one-me.

Racial markets for funerals

There are ethnic and racial markets for funerals. There was always some flexibility and fuzziness around the boundaries of the ethnic markets. The strength of these markets has weakened-as the Cipollas of Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn were realizing. According to industry historian Habenstein,

“The long history of ethnic groups having their own funeral directors...skilled and understanding in understanding their respective services and customs," has been disappearing for decades. By the 1950s, "Few funeral directors today count on a single ethnic or religious group for their clientele." He noted one major exception to this: black funeral directors. “Negro funeral homes are still predominantly dependent upon what amounts to an all-Negro clientele”(Habenstein 1955:574). Almost 70 years later, the exception remains true.

The black funeral market, like ethnic funeral markets, is shaped by forces within the community - trust, loyalty, familiarity. However, the racial market is different. But in the case of race and funeral homes, there are also strong external forces. Ethnic and racial markets can also be shaped by exclusion – where members of one group refuse to serve customers of another. The rigid racial segregation of funeral homes was significantly shaped by exclusion.

In their classic study *Black Metropolis*, Cayton and Drake (1945) argued that two particular types of businesses were truly protected – or “closed” – markets for blacks: barber shops and funeral homes:

Though the odds are against the negro in the general merchandising field [even within this black neighborhood] undertakers, barbers, and beauticians operate within a closed market, competing only among themselves. Negro undertakers have a virtual monopoly on burying the colored dead (456).

Whites operated plenty of businesses in the black neighborhood they studied. So what is distinct about funeral homes and barber shops? Physical contact. It was, according to sociologist Robert Boyd, the "refusal of white undertakers to touch the corpses of African Americans" that made undertaking one of the few profitable and prestigious occupations open to Blacks. "Undertaking was perhaps the most exclusive protected market available to African American entrepreneurs in the early twentieth century" (1996:138).

Segregation disappearing: whites will bury blacks

"Funeral homes in the United States have traditionally been and continue to be segregated by race- Black people use Black owned homes, and Whites use White-owned homes" (McIlwain 2003:75).

This statement, from the 2003 book *Death in Black in White*, is not quite true. In 1985 *The New York Times* discovered that black people do use white owned homes. Or, rather, from *the Times* perspective, white funeral directors (in the South, no less) were burying blacks. The editorial details progress of breaking down this "last vestige" of racial segregation in America.

The grossest racial segregation has been eradicated in most of America. Yet some vestiges of the old system remain. From a friend in rural east Texas comes word that one such remnant is disappearing, and not everyone is pleased.

The white funeral director in a small town has begun to accept and even to compete for black burials. The local black funeral director recently complained that he went an entire month without a funeral and saw three jobs that once would have been his go to his white competitor.

"It's happening all over," says Gertrude Roberts Moore, executive secretary of the National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association, the Chicago-based trade organization of black funeral directors. Especially in small towns, she said, white morticians are "going after the [black] business now. They go all out."

There's no explanation for the development other than the aggressive efforts of individual business people. But it inspires several thoughts. Though it may thin the ranks of black business people, it must nevertheless be counted as progress, however minor. At the same time, it allows us to see in retrospect how much segregation distorted our lives, and deaths.

NYT editorial "Restoring Rights Death, Black and White" (1985).

Actually, *New York Times*, there *is* a clear explanation for the pursuit of black business, there always has been. Profit. Whites have, throughout the industry's history, been "accepting" even "competing" for black funerals. The pursuit has intensified as whites increasingly choose the cheaper cremation, but it is far from new and far from an indicator of racial progress.

Open minded individual businessmen are not the only ones pursuing the black market. There is an industry wide push, including from the major corporations. These efforts are well covered in (other) media. Large white corporations "have discovered gold in the death industry in the Black Community," reported the *Philadelphia Tribune*. *The US News and World Report* cover story "The Death Care Business" laid out the explanation in matter of fact, sometimes cringeworthy, terms:

The death industry is increasingly targeting Catholics, Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians precisely because these groups still hold to traditional rituals and have not participated in the great shift among white Protestants: toward cremation and bodiless memorials, away from store bought funeral services with an expensively embalmed body on view in an expensive casket.

The African American market is "highly desirable for death-care providers" because they "often favor grand funerals"(Horn 1998).

NFDM&A President, Gregory Burrell, also understood that it was profits, not racial progress that explained whites burying blacks. When we spoke in 2012, he pointed specifically to the "cremation problem" white funeral directors faced.

One of the things that is going on in this industry is, in the white community, you guys are having a lot more cremations and we're still having more traditional funerals-even if we have some cremations. So the white funeral directors now-as a result of their cremation rate spiking so high-are having to go after the African-American business.

The cremation crisis of the industry - at least for part of the industry - is an important part of the current explanation, but the pursuit of black business by whites is no "new development"-the "racial progress" of whites burying blacks came long before the cremation crisis. Whenever competition for funerals is tight, the racial boundary - or at least whites willingness to cross it - loosens.

The Jim Crow South provides a stark example. At this peak of institutionalized segregation, it happened that the market for funerals was particularly tight. Funeral directing, as an occupation,

emerged a few decades earlier. In the late 19th century, the funeral business was a wide open market. There were few funeral directors and plenty of deaths. The turn of the century death rate was high (19.6 per 1000). By the 1920s, the death rate dropped by a third while the number of funeral directors more than doubled. There was, in other words, an oversupply of funeral directors and an under supply of customers. This competition, according to historian Suzanne Smith, put "white undertakers in the position of seeking any and all customers regardless of race. Many white funeral directors, who originally resisted the idea of working with black clients, eventually sought out the race business in order to survive" (2010:73).

The demographic problem-more funeral directors and fewer funerals-was more pronounced among black funeral directors. While the total number of funeral directors doubled, among blacks, the increase was six fold. Their problems were compounded by the fact that their "protected" market was not sufficiently protected by exclusion, whites were willing to cross the physical and social distance involved in the profitable burial of blacks. What happens when white undertakers seek out the race business? What are the options available to black undertakers?

The segregation of the industry has never been complete. Nor was the segregation that did exist "only a result of the racist practices on the part of white business owners," which, according to Smith is, "the common assumption"(Smith 2010). Black funeral directors had an interest and a role in promoting segregation.

Early black capitalism- Entrepreneurship and race patronage.

At the turn of the century, post emancipation, but also with the waning of the political progress made by blacks during Reconstruction, black leaders turned their focus on economics and financial

independence as the mechanism for racial progress. Money is power. Black leaders like W.E.B DuBois and Booker T. Washington campaigned for economic independence, self-sufficiency. (Resolutions from the 1899 Conference for the Study of the Negro Problem.)

Early 20th century black capitalism called for full community participation-entrepreneurship from business people and race patronage from consumers. These worked in tandem to create the money and power within the black community. The 1936 National Negro Congress emphasized the mutual dependence, “The development of sound and thriving Negro business is most indispensable to the general elevation of the Negro's social and economic security ... all Negroes consider it their inescapable duty to support Negro business by their patronage” (National Negro Congress 1936). Multiple debates ensued, continue, and were on display at the 2012 NFDMA convention in 2012. Debates about segregationist versus integrationist approaches, questions about the viability of a separate economy in a white dominated society, about the calculus between risks and benefits of separation, degree and nature of reliance on the loyalty and patronage of the black community.²⁹

The National Funeral Directors and Morticians Association was founded in 1924 on principles of black capitalism. Its earliest iteration was an auxiliary of Booker T. Washington's National Negro Business League. Consistent with the black capitalism movement, the funeral industry actively, and in unusually explicit terms, advocated segregation to protect their market. Blacks should operate

²⁹ *Limits of entrepreneurship and patronage:* “This hope for the salvation of the Negro masses by the erection of black business within the walls of white capitalism is clearly futile. It is obvious that the advocates of Negro business attempt to labor a policy of "expediency" through exploitation of the segregation incident to the racial dualism of America. Negro business suckles at the breast of the poverty-stricken Negro ghettos and is inevitably under-nourished. And must remain so. It exists only on the sufferance of that dominant white business world which controls credit, basic industry, and the state. The appeal which Negro business makes for the support of Negroes is a racial one, viz.: that the race can advance only through economic unity. Yet the small, individually-owned Negro businesses cannot meet the price competition of the larger-capitalized, more efficient white businesses. The very poverty of the Negro consumer dictates that he must buy where he can find cheapest prices.” Bunche

their own funeral homes and blacks should support those funeral homes. But given the economic pressure from white competition, encouraging black patronage might not be enough. To blunt this unfair advantage, the NFDM&A called for instruments, laws, if possible, to enforce funeral industry segregation, especially preventing white funeral directors from burying blacks. A foundational goal of the association was “to use every instrument, argument within our realm to induce White Funeral Directors to refuse to bury Negroes who seek their services”(quoted in Smith 2010:70).

All Negro businessmen and professionals have to try to make as much use as possible of racial solidarity as a selling point. This means that the entire Negro middle and upper class becomes caught in an ideological dilemma. On the one hand, they find that the caste wall blocks their economic and social opportunities. On the other hand, they have, at the same time, a vested interest in racial segregation since it give them what opportunity they have (Myrdal 1944:305).

Historian Suzanne Smith describes this as the “central paradox” facing black funeral directors. “In the strange calculus that evolves from a Jim Crow world, racial segregation was-for all practical purposes-in the best interest of the black business people, since it theoretically guaranteed them a captive and steady base of consumers”(2010: 47).

Desegregation and the black national.

Segregation created an ideological dilemma for black business people. Desegregation brought a different set of dilemmas, different challenges to their opportunities. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a clear victory for race relations in the United States, but a complicated and uncertain one for black business people. Racial integration in the marketplace meant more choices for black consumers but a less secure base of customers for the black business owner.

The application of the Civil Rights Act in the public sphere-desegregating schools, for example, was fraught, hotly debated, headline news. Its application in the private sphere-it also applied to businesses-it prohibits discrimination by privately owned places of public accommodation on the

basis of race, color, religion or national origin. Many private enterprises either didn't understand its application, or chose to ignore it.

The ambiguity in the private sector is highlighted by the "informal agreement" uncovered by *The Washington Post* in the 1960s. This "informal agreement" within the funeral industry also highlights the dilemmas of desegregation for blacks, and asymmetry of the market. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which bars discrimination in both the public and private sectors, the Washington Post uncovered an "unwritten agreement" between the black and white funeral associations (Kaiser 1967). Funeral business, both sides agreed, would be handled "on a racial basis...Negroes should be buried by negroes and whites should be buried by whites." When, in 1967, a black consumer filed a complaint against a white funeral home for denial of service, funeral directors, both black and white, were taken by surprise. The agreement was openly acknowledged by black and white funeral directors alike.

White funeral directors questioned about the pact did not recognize this as racially discriminatory. They presented it as race positive. They turned away black customers in order to support black funeral homes. A spokesperson for the cited funeral home explained that they had great respect for Negro-owned funeral homes and "We don't tread on their territory." Another white funeral director elaborated on the rationale:

You have to realize funeral directing is one profession that Negroes do on completely equal footing with whites. Their success has been based on the old formula of segregation. A lot of us who don't like that formula would also hate to find ourselves in a position where we might put some of these good Negro operators out of business.

For whites, the unwritten pact could be generous *and* self-serving. Many, like the Cipollas, might prefer not to serve blacks. They could turn away black customers and say it was to out of respect for

blacks. Furthermore, there was little risk involved. Whites don't go to black funeral homes so it didn't increase the competition for their clients.

Black funeral directors likewise acknowledged the agreement. But few had any need-or opportunity-to enforce it. According to *The Washington Post*, "Few Negro funeral operators reported much experience with white clients. Most of them denied they had turned down whites" (Kaiser 1967).

The black national now.

When the NFDMA was founded, black funeral directors faced two major obstacles: 1) whites willing to bury blacks and 2) blacks choosing to be buried by whites. Over the past hundred years, race relations have changed dramatically, but the racial politics of burial and the obstacles faced by black funeral directors, remain remarkably unchanged. If whites burying blacks was a threat to black businesses in a legally segregated United States, in many ways, it's worse now.

Cremation has intensified the pressure felt by black funeral homes in a desegregated and tightening funeral market. *The Philadelphia Tribune* ran a three part series – "Grave Condition: the future of Black-owned funeral home." That year, the NFDMA celebrated its 60th anniversary and at the top of the agenda was the threat from white corporations.³⁰ "Large white companies literally "raiding" the Black community... These companies are aggressively pursuing a market they once ignored and discriminated against."

The outlook was split among black funeral directors. Some, according to *The Tribune*, had little optimism that the black funeral homes could withstand the raid by corporate interests. Others,

³⁰ At the peak of SCI rise, the entire industry felt this threat. Add to the equation particular profitability of the black market and fewer racial barriers and the threat was magnified for the black industry.

however, were confident in the power of race patronage. Black funeral homes could "withstand the corporate onslaught, *provided the Black community remains loyal.*" There were some suggestions that it was effective, that race loyalty has helped stymie SCI's efforts to "raid" the black funeral business. "Executives of the major funeral chains going after the African-American market have not only repeatedly denied that they are out to eliminate the Black funeral home, but have expressed their difficulty in actually becoming accepted players in the market." A spokesman for SCI told the *Tribune* that while the company wants to purchase funeral homes catering to Blacks, "They don't want us."

The goals of the present day NFDM&A do not include racial segregation. In fact, there is no mention of race at all in their goals. It is, however, and entirely black organization. And after three days at the Jubilee convention in Las Vegas, it was clear that the racial politics of burial remained central in 2012.

The NFDM&A turns 75

The NFDM&A turned 75 in 2012. In August, they celebrated their jubilee year in Las Vegas: three days at the Mirage Hotel. This would be my third funeral director convention that year. Much of the convention made no explicit reference to race. There were the same categories of CEUs. The majority of presenters were African American, but not all. Like the New York convention, there were company sponsored events, outings, free stuff, fundraisers for committees and auxiliaries. I knew it was a primarily black organization - and quickly realized it was an entirely black organization. I was the only non-black registrant. This did not go unnoticed. For three days, I received a remarkable amount of guidance-advice on what I should do, what was most important, what I should skip. This was one of the ways I realized how conspicuous I was. I assume all newcomers

were given as much assistance as I was. There was a system in place to identify new funeral directors: nametag flags. There were no “researcher” flags-which would’ve been simpler.

Early on Day One, I had an interview with Kenneth Dupree, Education Chair of the NFDM&A. My recorder was giving me trouble. Fuming at it, waiting for Dupree, I felt an older gentleman staring at me. I wanted to ignore him and fix the damn recorder, but he was circling, and finally approached me, apprehensively (did I look that angry at the recorder?). In a whisper, he said, "Can I just ask you one question?" "As long as it's not a technical one," which I think came out snarkier than cute. I didn't say it, but I was also hoping he wasn't going to ask something serious, personal, or complicated. I didn't want to be late for the interview. He wasn't deterred by my snippiness. "Did you, uh, did you know it was an African American Association? Did they tell you that?" I laughed, relieved (he looked like he was going to ask me something serious, personal, complicated-any of which would've made me late for my interview.). Oh, okay. I'm glad that you weren't surprised..”

Mr. Texas would not make me late for my interview. When Dupree appeared, it was clear they were old friends. And together they advised me on what I needed to do and see while I was at the convention-starting with the social activities.

I skipped evening socials-the awards dinners, the fundraisers at the New York convention. At funeral director conventions, the evening activities tend to require not only formal attire but also a major outlay of money-often \$100 or more per ticket. Flying out to Vegas was already expensive, so I figured I might as well attend at least one. I had already narrowed it to two options: *The Professional of the Year* and the *Undertakers Ball*. The *Undertakers Ball*, a fundraiser for the Political Action Committee, had two things going for it: a great name and cheaper ticket-\$60. But a ball? What did

that mean? Like a dance? I was alone, knew only one or two other attendees and it sounded awkward. The *Professional of the Year*, on the other hand, cost \$100, called for African or Black Tie attire, and, while less awkward than a dance, sounded potentially dull.

Dupree insisted I must go to both. He was gregarious, social, welcoming, wanted me to join everything. When I pressed my case, the costs, he was decisive about which would be more fun: the undertakers ball. It wasn't a ball, he assured me, it was a show! Did I know what shouldering a casket meant? He was surprised I did. Well, this was that and more. It was a step off, a competition between funeral homes showcasing the most elaborate pall bearing I would ever see. The awards dinner, he conceded, wasn't that exciting. Awards dinners are really nothing but "pre-funerals"-he said, waiting for, and getting, a laugh from me and Mr. Texas. He still wasn't ready for me to miss out on the evening's festivities altogether. Mr. Texas had the solution. Batesville, the casket company and one of the main sponsors of the convention, was hosting a free cocktail hour before the dinner. I promised I would attend.

Black Capitalism: runaway slave, Malcolm X..

Dr. Boyce Watkins was the day one headline speaker. Despite the glossy advertisement and the crowds gathering, I had no interest in attending a seminar called "The Laws of Money." Financial seminars by accounting types are a dry staple of funeral directors conventions. But I got noticed outside of this one by another helpful convention goer who took me by the elbow and ushered me towards the crowded room."You better get in there now." Tired and uninterested in the topic, I politely-and ineffectively-resisted. He continued to walk me towards the ballroom, insisting, "This is the most important talk of the whole conference. You have to go." So I went.

Dr. Watkins is not an accountant and this was not dry. Over the course of 90 minutes, he laid out an impassioned case for black capitalism. Watkins, a "scholar, author, financial psychologist and highly sought after social commentator" speaks nationally, generally to black audiences, about financial independence. The glossy session announcement summarized his fifth book, *Black American Money*: "African Americans should think of financial independence as key to their spiritual and social independence." His session, "The laws of money: the power to control your own destiny" was standing room only.

Watkins spoke to the founding principles of the organization-black capitalism, independent black businesses. This was an impassioned call for financial empowerment with echoes of DuBois and Washington, but by way of Malcolm X and the runaway slave:

Get out of the master's house! Shake the plantation mentality! Start your own business! "Rather than exist in an innate dysfunctional institution, the runaway slave said, I'm gonna disassociate myself from this institution because its corrupt from its very core... To be truly free, one needs to be truly independent, and specifically independent of institutions that are not *ours*."

The crowd was not enthused by references to slave mentalities or plantations, until he began unpacking the plantation metaphor. The plantation is not the only corrupt institution to flee from- there are also white corporations. When Watkins speaks at large corporations, he's often approached by black employees who take him aside afterwards to tell him about "all the craziness going on." His advice to them? "Get out." As he put it to one black employee: "It's really difficult to move into somebody else's house and move around the furniture. You want these changes in these institutions, but unfortunately, these are not always our institutions. Sometimes if you really want that freedom you really gotta have your own institutions." The audience began warming up.

If you are always caught up with being associated with the biggest and brightest company with the most money, the most power and prestige then you'll never have

that chance to take that step to build that little institution that's yours. My business is not a multi-billion dollar corporation but guess what? It is mine!

This was the biggest applause (and "Amen!") line. He never tied the talk directly to funeral service, but he didn't need to. It was about black ownership of small businesses and the majority of the all black audience owned their small businesses-or aspired to.

Dr. Watkins didn't quite tie the talk back to Malcolm X either. Watkins focused on the individual, the individual business owner's independence- independence from white corporations. For Malcolm X, like Booker T. and DuBois, the uplift of the black community was at the heart of the call for a separate black economy. It wasn't just a separate black business, it was a separate black economy-keep money in the community, race patronage was essential, the double duty dollar.

Watkins is silent on the role or responsibility of the community, the consumer-not only loyalty, but preferences-both critical to the prospects for small black funeral home. But this was no problem-he was preaching to the choir. These were black business owners. This might have been the most important seminar of the conference, but that critical other part of the story-the consumer side-was the most important question of the night. And the choir was less harmonious.

Funeral director of the Year

After a full day of seminars, I fully regretted my promise to attend the evening events. I was tired. Reluctantly, I showered, put on the one formal dress I own³¹, and headed to the free casket company cocktail hour, as I promised.

³¹ Which happens to be a full length dress hand made in Tanzania, so literally, but not conspicuously, African attire.

My regrets disappeared when I arrived at the cocktail hour. I'd barely sipped my first drink when a gentleman deliberately approached me, and introduced himself as Gregory Burrell, the NFDMA&A President. We talked about the project, he agreed to an interview. I was ready to be done for the night. When the ballroom doors opened for the dinner, I made my exit. Or, I tried to. Once again, I was generously redirected, informed of the right course of action. A group of southern undertakers noticed I was going the wrong way. I explained the situation-I didn't buy a ticket and I was tired. Neither was an acceptable excuse. They would get me into the dinner. I wasn't sure I was the easiest person to sneak in, but they figured it out. In the end, thank goodness they did.

While it was hours of long winded pre-funeral praise, no there was no vegetarian option, and yes, one of the southern gentleman, in his late 70s was wildly inappropriate with me, I was still lucky to be there. On a personal level, it would have been conspicuous, if not insulting had I ducked out before President Burrell spoke. In his closing remarks, he asked each of the evenings honored guests to stand as he introduce them. There were three including the mayor of Tuskegee, and me. "Kristin Murphy from the Institute for Social and Economic Research at Columbia University-who was doing great research on the organization and the industry at large" got a warm round of applause from the group.³² On the research level, I was grateful for the southern intervention. Without them, I wouldn't have heard the Professional of the Year pose the question that became the talk of the convention.

Why aren't we burying Biggie?

Seated in the Mirage Ballroom with over 500 funeral directors, sponsors, vendors, I read through the ten page program and second guess my decision and luck. In addition to the fifteen speakers-family, friends, co-workers, association officials, the program included three prayers, two musical selections

³² This was mildly embarrassing, but proved helpful in clarifying what I was doing there. It also opened many interview opportunities.

Pastor Cowart of the Divine Favor Baptist Church, recognition of convention sponsors, plus that vague category of “special presentations” which brought another five or so speakers to the microphone. This pre-funeral praise regularly brings honoree, Ted Felder, to tears.

After two hours of testimonials and tears, the 2012 Professional of the Year finally takes to the podium. He is a performer. The previous night, he headlined the ladies auxiliary fundraiser as “Aunt Flossie”-dressed in drag. For his Professional of the Year stage time, he was dressed in a full length dashiki with headdress. For the first 20 minutes of his acceptance speech, he recounted his career and the success of his new funeral enterprise: Ted’s Affordable Mortuary and Cremation Services, Inc. About 20 minutes in, his address reaches an emotional crescendo as he appeals to the audience to consider the future, the fate, the state, of the black owned funeral home.

"Take the example of Biggie. We can bury his aunts! We can bury his cousins! Why aren't we burying Biggie?"

Biggie Smalls, the Notorious B.I.G, was shot dead in Los Angeles in 1997. His funeral was epic. There was a fan-thronged procession through the streets of Brooklyn. What funeral home was in charge? Frank E. Campbells, the Upper East Side flagship of Service Corps International, a white owned corporation.

The next morning, I put the question of the night to President Burrell: Why *did* Biggie use a white funeral home? Burrell had a simple answer: Frank E. Campbell’s is the fanciest funeral home in New York City. Of course someone of his prominence, with his money, should use the fanciest - who cared who owned it? Clearly a large portion of his membership cared. Hundreds in the audience last

night cared, last night. Clearly, hundreds of his members - the audience for the speech, cared very much who owned it - judging from the thunderous response and the question continued conversations for the duration of the convention. Burrell took a practical, hard-nosed businessman approach to the question. There was no room for race patronage. Burrell imagined that Biggie's mother might have thought the same way. She *could* have said, "Biggie sold records to black people. Biggie needs to go to a black funeral home." But she was probably so distressed that she let the manager handle it. Biggie, a superstar, should be buried at the "fanciest place out there... And all they know is Frank E. Campbell."

I wasn't sure I understood. Was the President of the NFDM&A so far in his position from his membership? Did he really see no importance to race patronage - a founding principle of the NFDM&A? After a few more questions, I was absolutely sure this was what he meant. Actually, it was a question not about race patronage but about white people that gave me the clearest picture of his position. Call it my hobbyhorse, but I regularly ask why white people don't use black funeral homes. When I asked this of President Burrell, I don't know if the question was unclear, if he was avoiding it, or what. But he, almost politician like, answered another question without missing a beat. I would try that question again later, but his response was useful for this other topic: black patronage. When I asked, why whites don't go to black, he answered why blacks do go to whites. More than that - In fact, he explained why he, the President of the black funeral directors association, himself would use a white funeral home:

This is what happens. As an educated man, with an MBA, working in corporate America, I got this nice plush office I go to every day. I have all my colleagues. When my mother dies, I'm not taking her to one of them little hole-in-the-wall funeral homes so my white friends from Wall Street can come down and see her. Now why would I bring my mama and lay her out in one of these holes-in-the-wall funeral homes with a man selling crack on the corner when I'm working in a plush office on Wall Street? My friends won't understand that correlation...If I gotta go to the white plush funeral home to make my white friends feel comfortable about this

environment, that's what I'm gonna do. And that's what's gonna happen. And people don't understand that.

And the people who don't understand that are the members of his organization.^{33 34}

Why aren't we burying Biggie? That was an easy question. The harder, more important question, the question Felder should be asking isn't Why aren't we burying Biggie? He didn't see the question as Felder asked it, nor as the chorus of his membership understood it. For Burrell, the question wasn't "Why is Frank E. Campbell's burying Biggie?" The *real* question was: "Why is there no *black* Frank E. Campbell's?"

The answer seemed obvious in my mind - my white, liberal, sociological mind, which has little interest or experience as a businessperson. Wasn't it capital? Access to financing? Business growth requires capital: wealth and access to loans. The racial wealth gap and the fact that minority owned businesses have less access to loans seemed like an important part of the answer to me. Why no black Frank E. Campbell? Racial disparity in both wealth and access to bank loans. White owned firms have more access to capital, which partially explained why the "fanciest" funeral homes-like Frank E. Campbell-are more often white. Fancy requires capital. . . Burrell agreed.... Kind of. "Yes, If you wanna play, you gotta have the money. You cannot have a 2x4 and expect to compete with Frank E. Campbell." Which doesn't really address how one *does* compete with Frank E. Campbell.

³³ The *other* people that would not understand that are the original founders of his organization. That President Burrell would choose a white funeral home is an affront to their founding principles. The race patronage of black capitalism sometimes required personal sacrifice on behalf on the consumer, the community. 'The mass of the Negroes must learn to patronize business enterprises conducted by their own race, even at some slight disadvantage'. Burrell, for one, was not willing to do that, nor was he calling for the African American community to do that. It's a practical choice for the proper respect, status, fanciness he'd want for his own mother. The onus is on the black funeral director to supply the best option.

³⁴ There are two parts to what they don't understand. The first is that black consumers have no obligation to choose a black funeral home if a white one is fancier. The second is actually his larger issue-that black funeral directors need to improve their businesses. They need to provide the fancy funeral home.

How do you get the money? We never got to the possibility of unequal access to loans, capital, wealth, resources for starting up a business.³⁵

As I raised explanation after explanation - from racial disparity in bank loans and wealth, even hedging mob money I knew advantaged more than one funeral home in New York, President Burrell kept returning the conversation to “that small business aspect.” So many members of his organization, so many of these “little shack” operators “are good funeral directors, but horrible business people. They awful! They can’t tell you how much it would cost them to put on the funeral. They just know how much they charge!

He wasn’t focused on an underlying explanation-it’s likely members of his organization understood that pretty well. He had his sights on a different issue, one closer to home, maybe one he could influence. He laid out the problem:

There are many people that are good funeral directors, but horrible business people. They awful! Part of the problem is that it’s so expensive [to start up]. You’ll have, especially in our community, you’ll have a funeral director that will open a business in a two by four. Put his name on the door and he off to the races. You just got all these little funeral homes. That’s why you see this disproportionate number of African American funeral homes to white funeral homes. You go to some major cities there are three white funeral homes, fifteen black funeral homes. They on every little corner. All these little shack funeral homes!

His issue is the little shacks themselves-not the external challenges to their expansion. Unlike proponents of black capitalism-including the founders of the NFDM&A, Burrell prioritized business success over independence. In stark contrast with Watkins who prioritized independence, specifically, not working for the man - over profitability, Get a job.

³⁵ At the time, I wasn’t even thinking so much about the racial disparities in bank lending or wealth. I was thinking of the advantage that Louie had. He cornered the Caribbean market with mob money.

They need to have a job. They don't need to be doing this. They on every little corner, all those little shack funeral homes. Some people sit around and take a 150 call place and run it down to 25. And they just sit there waiting for that *one* funeral every two weeks. They have no overhead, no cars. They don't pay health insurance.

Is there a little shack phenomenon among black funeral homes? In my experience, yes. Before zeroing in on black funeral homes, we need to pull back and look at the big picture: the US funeral market at large. From an outsider's perspective, most funeral homes seem "little." There are some really high volume funeral homes... but these are rare. The top 8% do 500 or more calls per year. The majority put on fewer than 150. The average funeral home puts on 112 per year-or roughly 2 funerals per week.

Empirical research on funeral markets is scarce. So a 2008 study of Florida funeral markets by Yale economists is worth some attention. Of general interest and surprise is the low volume required to keep a funeral home open. In Florida, a funeral home could make it on 152 funerals a year-fewer than three per week. The bottom quarter of these funeral homes got by on only sixty-nine funerals per year - just over one per week. Of particular interest to this project, however, are the findings about race and ethnicity. The average number for black funeral homes was only sixty-six. How were they managing? The authors didn't have data on income, but offered an explanation consistent with the "black people have grand funerals" idea: with a higher profit margin per funeral, black funeral homes had a lower threshold for sustainability.

Cremation, that profit reducing problem facing white funeral homes, is less common among African Americans. Burials are more expensive. And this is consistent with a common narrative- African Americans "prefer grand funerals," and similar because-life-is-tough or back-to-slavery explanations of the greater investment in black homegoing celebrations. African- Americans have a "full service

funeral most of the time" because "the focus has always been on the fact that what comes after leaving this earth is superior [and] death is an important rite of passage [so therefore] the funeral rite must contain a suitable emotional impact"(Hughes-Wright and Hughes 2007:430.)

I think we need to reconsider this explanation and consider alternative possibilities. Yes, cremation cuts into the sales and profits of funeral homes. Yes, blacks are less likely to cremate. But a preference for burial, even the trickier "greater cultural respect for the dead," does not necessarily translate to grand funerals... or higher sales. In fact, blacks may spend LESS on funerals. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, "African-Americans spend about \$3,000 on a traditional funeral and burial." This is far less than the 5,200 whites typically spend on a traditional funeral. Okay, so it's about cremation. Partially. The same article puts the average cremation at \$2,000. Is the African American cremation rate really enough to make this market look so good? With the full funeral (and associated labor and costs to the funeral home) only \$1000 more than the lower effort cremation? (Henderson 1997). This seems to contradict what he says elsewhere in the article - about high cost burials.

The available data is insufficient for either a detailed comparison of the profitability or to support the common narrative-black funerals are more profitable.

Importantly, this rare empirical study analyzed ethnicity and distance as separate determinants. Based on their data, they concluded that, even taking distance into account, "Ethnic preferences can be strong...While consumers prefer close by funeral homes, they are willing to travel to obtain funeral services from co-ethnics" (Chevalier, Harrington and Morton 2009:5) .

On closer inspection, however, their findings apply not to ethnicity but to race; even more strikingly, the findings appear to be less about preference *for* than aversion *to*. Stunningly, their conclusion that “ethnic markets can be strong” is based this conclusion is based on one strong finding: Whites will go out of their way to avoid a black funeral home. “Whites,” according to the study, “are willing to pay more and travel farther to bypass a black funeral home. In particular, the point estimates suggest that, for a given price, a white customer would be willing to travel 16 miles farther, other things equal, to patronize a non-black funeral home” (Chevalier, Harrington and Morton 2009:22).

So we have some suggestive data about the size and profitability of black funeral homes - the existence of Burrell’s “little shack” phenomenon - these “25 funerals a year” places. And I have stories and experiences that suggest the same.

I knew the market was inefficient. I’d been to funeral homes that seemed so slow, I wondered how they stayed open. Still, I thought Burrell’s “25 a year” must’ve been hyperbole. Or I would have, if I hadn’t interviewed one of Burrell’s own cabinet members the day before. Kenneth Dupree, super convention advisor to me, Education Chair of the NFDMA, was a firm believer in, advocate for, what Burrell dismissively called the “little shack” model - with, coincidentally (or not) the seemingly arbitrary identifying number of 25 per year.

In other words, before encountering Burrell’s hyperbole, Dupree explained the 25 call per year funeral home - praising it, making sense of it. Or, I would have thought he was exaggerating. But before meeting Burrell’s hyperbole, I interviewed someone who explained the 25 call a year reality. On the first day of the convention, I interviewed an advocate of the 25-call-a-year business model - within President Burrell’s own ranks: NFDMA Education Committee Chair, Kenneth Dupree. As

we talked, he mentioned “funeral homes doing 25 calls a year.” I thought I misheard him, so I interrupted. But I heard right. So Dupree laid out the logic - emphatically, enthusiastically. 25 calls a year?

You can *ab-so-lutely* make it on 25 calls a year. Your building is paid for. If it’s not paid for, you have a mortgage, but you live there. You can work another job, have other sources of income, your wife can work. You can set things up so you have no fixed costs.

So it looks like little shacks exist. But why?

So it seems like it is possible - to keep a funeral home open on 25 calls a year (Dupree’s version) or, to take Burrell’s position - that there are little shack funeral homes out there. But if Dupree’s is one model of what this means-extra jobs, not a lot of security- why???

Prestige, influence, independence.

The status of the funeral director varies by community. Among African Americans, in part because of this protected opportunity-for money and a “professional” job, the status of the funeral director is high. “For Black death workers,” according to McIlwain (2003),

They as individuals and the business they ran, were intertwined with other community institutions, most notably the church...By insisting on decent (and sometimes elaborate) funerals for all, undertakers contributed greatly to feelings of unity and pride within their communities and garnered much respect and esteem in the process” (41).

Smith focuses primarily on the business success, some of which was channeled into the community, led to influence, consistent with the idea, explanation provided by black capitalism. Interviewees focused more on the prestige, the role in the community.

Edith Morgan, a funeral director in the Bronx, gave me the history: "In the black community," began Morgan,

Think history now, think history. I mean, you know your sociology. You can’t help but attach history and the social significance of it. I grew up in the segregated South and the only professionals-the people that received any sort of respect or slight

inkling of respect in the segregated South-were your funeral directors, the preachers, and the teachers. The funeral director was looked up as, like, the big Willie.

The funeral director did more than bury you. He had influence, he could help you with issues from water bills to trash collection. He had more influence because he had, by virtue of his work (securing permits from officials, for instance), more contacts:

with different people, at different levels... and because you're of a diff-, [she paused and restarted] if you perceive yourself of a different status, and you needed someone as a go-to person, he was that person that could expedite things for you or at least talk to someone to could help you out.

Patrice Wood in Brooklyn:

Back then, prestige came with the title undertaker mortician. It wasn't just the undertaker, it was the black undertaker. It was uncommon to see a black man in a position of authority. When a black family is taught, uh,' [she hesitates, takes a deep breath and continues], "I can say it. When a black family is taught that their dads only held blue collar jobs, they only worked in positions where they weren't seen. Then there's now one who is seen in the community, who stands out in the community. It's like a kid's birthday party. It's like the biggest celebration that you could ever possibly have. Cause your dad is at the forefront. Or someone who is the same color as you... is in the forefront. He drives a nice car, wears a suit. He stands up in front of hundreds of people.

There's a political push, a clear ideological reason for an African American to open a small business. Over the last hundred years, African American leaders-from DuBois and Booker T to Malcolm X have called for growing an independent black business class-as a means of empowerment, community uplift, racial progress. Watkins calls for financial independence from white corporations. Dupree's design is consistent with Watkins-build a little institution that's yours-even at great personal and financial risk. Despite a century of advocating small business ownership, self employment among blacks remains lower than other groups.. Except among funeral homes. In the US, 15% of funeral homes are black owned. However, these only account for 5% of total sales.

What do we know about preferences anyway?

Another common explanation for why an African American would choose a white owned funeral home is because they don't know it's white owned. There's a long history of this. Historian Smith describes the 'deception' whites used to penetrate the black market in the early 1900s. They would hire "a black funeral director to manage a funeral home to give the appearance that the business was black-owned when it was, in fact, a white operation" . Deception is how Smith frames it, and it may very well be true. If so, it's driven by a presumption of a black preference for a black funeral home. It is also possible, or even simultaneously true, that a white business person might be interested in the profit potential of burying blacks, but not interested in doing the work-interpersonal and physical-himself. But any discussion of why someone chooses is really a question about motivation, preferences.

Deception or black management as appealing to the black market assumes a black preference for a black funeral home. Do we know this? There is some evidence.

It seems that corporate ownership is not necessarily the primary fear among Blacks in this regard. The feeling I get is that it is not about corporate ownership versus family ownership, but rather White versus Black ownership...Were any corporation to acquire a Black funeral home, chances are few people would be aware of the transfer in ownership....Generally, in such buyouts, the name of the funeral home remains the same, and the staff is typically retained, as well (McIlwain 2003:77).

There are anecdotal reports that black preference for a black owned funeral home is strong. Large corporations interested in the profitability of the black market say they've had some difficulty penetrating it. SCI has had some difficulty penetrating the African American market. A spokesman reported that the company was trying to buy black funeral homes but, "They don't want us." *The Wall Street Journal* "Death Watch? Black Funeral Homes Fear a Gloomy Future as Big Chains Move in.... is the black-owned, family-run funeral home destined for a slow death?" "One pragmatic hitch:

African-Americans tend to be loyal to the family undertaker, and many don't like the idea of being buried by a white-owned conglomerate" (Henderson 1997). Black funeral directors in Philadelphia worried SCI would work around this by keeping the "black funeral director in place as a representative of the chain" (Wilson 1997).

As the limits of race patronage highlight, not all blacks are committed to using black owned businesses. So far, the answers to why blacks would choose a white funeral home have been mostly about the greater 'fanciness'. But there are other answers-other explanations, interpretations of the preferences motivating blacks to choose a white funeral home. Another, not uncommon, explanation includes race itself as part of the prestige of the funeral home. Two past presidents of the NFDMA chose this explanation. In 1929, founding President Robert Reed wrote: "It is an old tradition of race people believing in the service of white people to bury them being superior to their own" (quoted in Smith 2010:72). In 2007, I asked past president Clarence Glover why blacks might go to a white funeral home. Mr. (now Reverend) Glover said: "To show they've made it. If they're making 50 or 80k a year, they don't need House of Glover any more. They've arrived."

Cremation is the crisis in the funeral industry at large. Integration is the crisis for the black funeral industry. There are dire predictions coming from across the board. Desegregation will "thin the ranks of black business people," predicted *The New York Times*. *The Wall Street Journal*: Black funeral homes, "one of the few remaining Black institutions in the African American community" are likely to become a "victim of integration," according to the black owned *Philadelphia Tribune*.

But maybe “ownership” doesn’t matter - or it’s a separate issue. There’s the question of culture, handling the body - i.e. having a black funeral director at the helm. The ownership question is more about community, race patronage.

Why is integration a crisis for black funeral directors? The research and reporting consistently covers one side of the story. Integration gives black consumers more options. Segregation protected the black funeral market-at least partially. The unwillingness or reluctance of whites to bury blacks left more blacks for blacks to bury. But the segregation was never complete, it never fully protected the market. Why is racial progress so obviously and unquestioningly linked to the deterioration of black businesses? One of the questions rarely asked is what role white consumers play in the fate of black businesses-funeral homes especially.

What about white people?

There is a lot about what black consumers do-why blacks would use a white funeral home, why they should not, how strict segregation helped black businesses, how residential segregation continues to.

What about white consumers? What I find interesting, surprising, is that this question is rarely asked. There is almost no discussion about the fact that whites don’t use black funeral homes-which seems like the obvious other part of the equation. Even those who specifically cite integration as the threat to black funeral homes focus on whites taking black business, never the inability of blacks to secure white business. But this part of the equation is conspicuously absent from industry discussions, strategies. It’s also absent even in the many media stories “shocked to discover there’s still segregation” in funerals. Or, it’s obliquely referred to-as it is in *The New York Times*. "Though it may

thin the ranks of black business people, it must nevertheless be counted as progress, however minor."

I can only assume that they know what black funeral directors know: "black people will go to a white funeral director, but white people will not go to a black funeral director." It may be absent from the headlines, but it's clear to black funeral directors. I heard it all the time. "The biggest difference is that the blacks will go to the whites and the whites will not come to us to bury under any circumstances." In interviews with black funeral directors, I heard this all the time. If whites "accept" black burials, but blacks don't have the option of "accepting" white burials, that would be a recipe for thinning the ranks of black business people.

The fate of the black funeral home is the NFDMA's primary concern. Their members are threatened by integration-white companies raiding the black industry and black customers going to white funeral homes. No one was talking about white people-as consumers. The convention offered no sessions on how to pitch to white clients. The fate of the black funeral home, somehow, seems unrelated to the white market. Robert Reed, first NFDMA president was keenly aware of the white market and how it impacted his members' prospects. The imbalance, the fact that blacks used white, but the inverse was not an option, was the basis for his appeal for segregation. Granted, this was during Jim Crow, but its still one of the few (almost) direct comments on the white consumers preferences. Reed appealed to the federal government to write segregation into the Fair Labor Practices Standards of the Funeral Industry on the basis of this imbalance. "The race traditions of our country prohibit the general burying of any but those of our race by our group. On the other hand, the white Funeral Director can, and in many instances, do seek to bury Negroes" (Quoted in Smith 2010: 71).

Why don't white people use black funeral homes-and why is it absent from the discussion? Is no one asking because the answer is so obvious? Maybe, but I'm asking anyway.

Historian Suzanne Smith offered a small glimmer-which is about the only coverage I've found. She's cited in multiple places. "For black funeral directors, the challenge of the civil rights age involved capitalizing on the business opportunities to which it availed them, while also working to retain their black clientele. For some, developing business in an integrated marketplace while retaining the loyalty of one's black customers was a difficult balancing act that required shrewdness and at times calculated marketing tactics. As Lincoln Ragsdale, a successful black funeral director eventually admitted in an interview for *Black Enterprise* magazine, "When I was losing money, I made a business decision. I took down my pictures of MLK and Booker T and put up some white folk. I hired white personnel and my business increased over 300 percent" (Quoted in Smith 2010:165).

Black funeral directors frequently told me that white people don't use black funeral homes. Less frequently did they offer an answer to my follow up question: "why not?" Ms. Garwood, former (and first female) president of the NFDMA, however, did not hesitate:

A funeral is about the second or third largest financial item that you'll spend in your life. I don't think white people like giving that amount of money to a black funeral home-to a black person because I don't think they like the idea of their money being spent in a black community.

.....

I tried to ask President Burrell the question-why whites don't use black funeral homes- multiple times in our interview. He kept answering other things. Maybe I wasn't as clear as I thought. I don't think it's because he was avoiding the question or reluctant to answer as much as it was just not on

his radar. The first time I asked him: why don't white people use black funeral homes? He answered a different question: why do blacks go to whites? Actually, he explained why he himself would go to a white funeral home... I kept trying different approaches. The one that worked? Pulling out the one piece of data I had : the Yale study.

We got to it in a roundabout way-while discussing how people generally choose a funeral home. Like most funeral directors I spoke to, he said personal connections to a funeral director was the most important factor. Most economists say location, specifically, proximity to the decedent is the most important factor. Burrell agrees that location is also important. I tell him about the study that found proximity is important *except* if the nearest funeral home is black owned, that white people will go out of their way to avoid a black funeral home.

When I finally got him to answer, it seemed that well, the explanation was obvious. And maybe my question was irrelevant.

Burrell: Okay, that makes sense.

Me: Why does that make sense?

Burrell: It makes sense because *because . that's. America.*

I wait.

Let me tell you, Kristin, black folk have been stereotyped for so long. I have to fight it every day. It is reality. That's an issue that we don't want to talk about in this country. It's real. I have to fight because... pause... all people know is what they see on television. [They don't see black professionals like him] All they know is that they see these black people and these black kids with their pants hanging down and gangs or drugs or you know...And so, when they think of a funeral home, that comes to their mind first...

Franklin T. Armstrong Funeral Home: South Bronx

Franklin T. Armstrongs in the South Bronx is exactly the kind of funeral home President Burrell would not use: it's a hole in the wall, there are drugs for sale on the street, and another little hole in

the wall funeral home on the opposite corner. Oh, and the funeral directors are horrible business people.

Integration is not the primary threat to Armstrongs. There are just too many: bad business practices, financial insecurity (not only from their business practices, but also real estate), poor neighborhood, competition and demographics. In other words, Armstrongs faced almost any possible threat to a funeral home-except those worrying the industry-cremation and personalization.

Armstrongs is in the South Bronx, specifically, Morrisania. The neighborhood is dead last in household income in all of New York City. There are almost no whites in the neighborhood, so the fact that whites won't use a black funeral home is not really the issue. However, Armstrongs has two other demographic problems. One is kind of related to segregation. Turns out, Hispanics are also unlikely to use a black funeral home. It's not quite as stark, but it's true. And the South Bronx, once synonymous with well, poor and black, is increasingly Hispanic. Avery's neighborhood is now 60% Hispanic.

The other is... a population boom of people that don't use a local funeral home. "Change is coming," Avery told me when we first met in 2007. That summer, Morrisania was poised for a building boom. Full city blocks were razed and under construction. Avery pointed to three separate construction sites visible from the funeral home. One was slated to house 400 families.

Change came, but it wasn't the change Avery anticipated. Back in 2007, Avery expected the new buildings would be condos, market rate housing. More families would move to the area. No one anticipated the housing crash. When I returned in 2012, the majority of the thousands of new units

were under contract with the City of New York for subsidized and supportive housing-for abused women and their children, the formerly incarcerated, recovering addicts, and 'the seriously and persistently mentally ill' (SPMI). At last check, more than 200 buildings within a mile radius of Armstrongs had supportive housing contracts.

The business.

In 1948, Franklin T. Armstrong was one of three black graduates of McAllister. Four years later, he opened his funeral home on the ground floor of a South Bronx tenement. Through the upheavals of the 1960s and 70s, Armstrongs did a stable-sometimes even a brisk- business of burying the dead (200-250 calls per year). In the 1980s, he passed on the business and the 15 unit tenement building to his nephew, Alexander Armstrong.

By 2007, Armstrongs was putting on about 100 funerals a year- a significant decline, but a manageable one. With income from the apartment rentals, no rent to pay on the funeral home and only Avery on the payroll, 100 funerals could generate enough income to keep the business afloat.... *If they hadn't been deep in gambling debt.* Avery knew Alexander was in serious, even dangerous, debt. She worried the reckless off the books borrowing, "from the wrong people" would "catch up with him" violently. Sometimes, even with the bars on the windows and the always locked door, she worried for her own safety in the office. Despite the financial mismanagement, Avery kept getting her paycheck and enjoyed her job. She was caught by surprise when Alexander told her he was selling the building and the funeral business.

The building and the business languished on the market. Alexander finally found a buyer for the building. They were a young Russian couple, described as 'local investors' by the real estate agency, 'local slumlords' by the locals. They paid well below the asking price, in cash. Then summarily began

evicting tenants. By 2012, there was a single tenant, Etta, holding on to her rent controlled apartment. Etta spent most days with Avery in the funeral home.

Avery and three other funeral directors-Phyllis, Andy and Ace-bought the business in 2010. Four co-owners is an unusual business model, but one that came out of necessity. No one alone had the resource, capital, access to loans, to make the purchase. Necessity, in this case, was not inventing anything good. The place was a hot mess. The funeral directors didn't get along, the tension was sometimes unbearable.

Franklin T. Armstrongs of 2010 was a different business than the one Alexander inherited in the 1980s. The four of them did not own the building. Therefore, they not only lacked the security of rental incomes, but were themselves paying rent. While Alexander had one employee (Avery), now the funeral income would be split four ways between the four employee owners. At the same time, the number of funerals was suddenly and inexplicably down. By August 2012, they were more than halfway through the year - with only 32 funerals on the books. None of the owners admitted concern about the volume — yet.

The personalities created a constant tension, day-to-day misunderstandings and dramas, but it was the growing recognition of fundamentally different business models that kept Avery up at night. Avery saw the previous owners run the place into the ground. She worried a lot about the books. She knew some of her co-owners were involved in questionable financial dealings (not gambling, but shady) that could jeopardize the business. At the same time, she didn't have the force of personality to challenge her co-owners and didn't feel that she was capable of making sense of the books.

Disorganization I: the bills

I arrived one morning and found myself locked out of the funeral home. No one answered the buzzer, so I walked around peering through each of the barred windows to see if anyone was inside. After 30 minutes in the August heat, peering into each of the barred windows, I finally called Avery's cell phone. She was in the basement prepping a body (for the freelancer) and you can't hear the buzzer down there. And nope, no one else was in the office during these business hours.

"Did you see the garbage out front? It's disgusting."

I had. The funeral home was usually a bit messy - personal belongings, magazines, take out food - strewn about, but that morning was special. As I stood on the street waiting for someone to buzz me in, I peered through the barred windows into the the office to see if anyone was in. No one was in the office, but I could see trash everywhere.

Avery is even keeled and gentle. So I was surprised that these are the first words out of her mouth. Yes, I definitely noticed the mess, but I didn't want to admit that I spent the last 1/2 hour mostly marveling at the trash - it seemed both judgmental and a potential land mine. While Avery was the owner who "brought me on" - the others were just as, if not more, likely to try to pull me on a side in whatever the day's drama happened to be. Thankfully, Thomas came in right behind me. Thomas, a 72 year old retiree (from the trucking industry, one of the few willing to take on a former convict like himself - thanks to their mob affiliation), had "been with" Armstrongs since the 1970s - taking odd jobs - removing bodies, working the floor at funerals. Under the new ownership, there was little work for him, but he came most days anyway, to socialize with Avery and Etta and other friends. Mostly, he served as an ally, confidante and sounding board to Avery. And Avery needed a sounding board that morning.

We sat in the cramped office. I moved a styrofoam takeout container from my chair to sit down, didn't quite know where to put it. "Just throw it on top" she said, glaring at the overflowing garbage. "I don't care if this garbage can grows a lawn of mold under it. I don't care if flowers start growing out of it. I'll just pick the flowers and carry on. I'm not doing it."

Avery and Thomas were convinced the garbage was left intentionally - a power move by Ace. For weeks, he'd been on a campaign to hire a cleaning person. Keeping the funeral home clean had always been a shared responsibility of the funeral directors. But Ace insisted it was too much additional work. They needed to hire someone to clean. Actually, they needed to hire someone specifically: Cheryl. Cheryl, Phyllis's sister, was unemployed, and in a "really tough spot." She needed a job. Armstrongs needed someone to clean. Avery repeatedly said no, they don't have money to pay someone to do work they can do themselves. Besides, Cheryl doesn't even clean up after herself or her kids when she's here.

Avery cleared a space on the desk and began opening the mail. Invoices confused her, she admitted. When they bought the business, they were determined to be better with the finances than Alexander. They planned to computerize their billing and invoices. But a year into it, none of the owners really understood-beyond generating bills-how to use the "new system." It was something they got at Office Depot [QuickBooks]. Avery brightened when I guessed the system, did I know how to use it? I didn't. She returned to the invoices, most she files away. An invoice from Matthews Casket company stops her in her tracks, face flashing from shock to indignation, she picked up the phone immediately. Waiting for someone to pick up she mumbles (to herself, me? Thomas?), "An Ambassador??? It can't be ours. I would know if someone bought that." The Ambassador was the "top-of-the-line" casket - describe it, it retailed around \$12,000. Or so I was told by Ace back in July

when I helped him unload the oversized (extra charge) delivered to Armstrong's for his nephew's funeral.

This is Avery from Armstrongs. I have a question about an invoice you sent. It was for an Ambassador – an oversized casket....Who was that for? Theo Bunker? We didn't have a Theo Bunker here. [She waited for a response]. It was for Robinson's? Oh, okay.

When she got off the phone, I said: "Theo Bunker? That's Ace's nephew." I remembered it so well because it was the first funeral I'd gone to with Armstrongs. Or I thought I was out on a funeral with Armstrongs. Turns out, even though Theo was embalmed at Armstrongs, the casket was delivered to Armstrongs, and he was laid out at Armstrongs, the funeral - and profits!- went to Robinsons.

Robinsons is a funeral home in Harlem. Phyllis's 'other' place. Avery was unfazed by this particular incident, but generally frustrated with Phyllis's management. Primarily, her mismanagement of bills. Because Phyllis was so far behind on bills, some casket companies won't sell to Newkirks anymore. Her solution? Phyllis had them shipped to Armstrongs – which had a better reputation with creditors. Avery always knew when a casket was for Robinsons because it was the only time the company requires cash on delivery (COD). Avery could not imagine how Phyllis got into this spot:

Why can't she just pay her bill? She got the money. We paying, what?? \$500 for the casket? She got \$2000 for the casket from the family! They *gave. you. the.* money! Why can't you pay for what they bought??

I asked Avery if Armstrongs could be held responsible for Phyllis's other debts. She was, after all, a co-owner. Avery wasn't sure, but didn't think so.

Disorganization II: a body

"I don't know anything about a Harrington," Avery said into the phone. Robert Harrington was dead for three weeks³⁶. Someone from the Medical Examiner's (ME) office was on the line wanting to know why Mr. Harrington is still in the city morgue and not at Armstrongs Funeral Home! Avery, funeral director and co-owner Armstrongs's assumed it was the ME's mistake. Sometimes people confuse Armstrongs on Prospect with the one on Westchester Ave. The ME's office was certain that it's Armstrongs on Prospect. Avery shuffled through piles of papers, checked the desk calendar and flipped through manila files in the desk drawer. She can't find anything about a Harrington. "I'm pretty sure we don't have a Harrington. But I'm alone in the office right now. Let me check with the other funeral directors and I'll call you right back."

"Lord have mercy!" she said, fanning herself with an envelope. It was the third day of a one hundred plus degree heat wave. It was the second day without air conditioning in the funeral home. The first day wasn't too bad. Avery and I spent it in the chapel, blinds drawn, lights out, ceiling fan on. And nothing happened all day. There was no funeral, no one walked in to make arrangements, there were no bodies to embalm, no caskets delivered - so we barely moved. But that wouldn't work this day. To find out if Mr. Harrington was their case, Avery spent the next four hours in the (much hotter) front office tracking down the other owners, trying to unravel this story.

Her first call was to Phyllis. They've known each other for over 20 years. Phyllis didn't answer her phone. She tried Ace next. Ace, the non-licensed, force of personality, co-owner, answered immediately. Ace thought Harrington sounded vaguely familiar. Maybe Phyllis made those arrangements, he wasn't sure. Since there was an all-owner emergency meeting with the landlord

³⁶ This could be a story of social isolation. That, however, is a story I cannot tell with the information I had. I don't know how or why Mr. Harrington was left for three weeks, unclaimed. Neither did the funeral directors. From my vantage point, I saw the story of the funeral home's deep disarray.

later that day, Avery could ask Phyllis then. If Mr. Harrington is their case, it'll be at least another day before he's out of the city morgue anyway. Avery did not want to wait that long to figure it out. Exasperated, Avery made one last call. Andy was co-owner number four. He was responsible for all of the removals for Armstrongs, the "body guy." And, nope, Andy knew nothing about the case and didn't care. Even if it was an Armstrong's case, he was too busy working out of his other funeral home to pick up the body.

Avery got back on the phone with Ace: "Andy's too busy." Ace was livid. But not because of Harrington. Like Andy, Ace wasn't particularly concerned about the man in the morgue that might be their case. Ace was singularly focused on the upcoming confrontation with the landlord. He'd been talking about it, plotting, and fuming all week. "Oh, he's too busy? Is that right? Uh huh. It's like *that??* Well, fine! We're gonna make the decisions without him."

Mr. Harrington was, indeed, an Armstrongs job. Phyllis made the arrangements, but took the folder home and forgot to write it on the desk calendar – where all the funeral directors are supposed to write vital information. Lots of things don't make it to the calendar. Avery was the only one visibly alarmed by the situation. Not only was she extremely contentious as a general rule, but also – embalming this body was her responsibility. In that heat wave particularly, a body found in an apartment, dead for three weeks would be an embalming nightmare at best... more likely, a clear closed casket case. Given the time and the heat, it was likely he would be too far decomposed to embalm. If he'd been at the ME's office, refrigerated, for some of that time, there was a chance. Avery wanted to find out as soon as possible.

A week later, Thomas and Avery lift the casket from the prep room to the viewing floor. I was shocked to realize Mr. Harrington. I was sure that after three weeks, unembalmed in a heat wave, he

would not be viewable. Turns out, Mr. Harrington was somewhere in between the scenarios. Clearly he wasn't a "full decomp," on the other hand, he wasn't quite a clear open casket case. But the family wanted Avery to try. Thomas, DK (a driver and aspiring funeral director), Avery and Phyllis all stand by as Thomas opens the casket.

"Oooh, Ooooh!! He does *not* smell good" Thomas sang.

From the doorway, I didn't smell anything. Thomas gestured me over. "Come over here. Smell right by the head." The smell was not good. Unplaceably not good (even after years in funeral homes). Odor problems are not unusual. The industry has a wide range of creative products/ solutions to address them – from odor eater cubes placed under the casket springs³⁷, to powders and gels specially made for casket (and satin) application. There are plenty of specialized products from the They They attack the odor problem with all the usual tools of the trade. There are these odor eater things that can go under the springs of the casket (). Then there are powders and gels that can go right in the casket. They apply all three and there's no improvement. The plan is to leave the casket open over night and "let him air out." DK predicts the whole funeral home will reek by morning-just in time for the viewing.

The smell was bad, but was curious how he looked, so I stay for a closer examination. (Remember, "hands and face"). There wasn't any real visible decomposition of the hands. Well, maybe some skin slip, but not much. And they could always put on gloves. His face looked okay-ish too, at least much better than I expected.... Then, I noticed his left eye. In life, Mr. Harrington wore a glass eye. This, however, did not accompany him on the slow trip from his apartment to the medical examiners office to the funeral home. In standard embalming cases, small disks are regularly placed under the

³⁷ A casket has a similar structure to an adjustable bed, planks and ways to elevate given parts.

eyelids.³⁸ Avery put one in, but one was not enough to make up for a fully missing eye. Her solution was to add some makeup to it – which, no one wanted to say out loud – just made it more conspicuous.

I was not there for the funeral, so I asked Phyllis about it on my next visit. I was shocked to hear they had an open casket. Not only that, but also there were no problems, no complaints from the family. “The family was happy.” “But what about his eye thing?” I asked. Phyllis shrugged, they found some glasses to put on him – which basically covered it up.

The lack of communication among the funeral directors, the inconsistency of any systems, could have resulted in disaster. Some funeral homes would consider it a disaster to leave a body an extra day at the morgue. Some families would be way more demanding (both of timelines and embalming quality).

Avery’s funeral home was in dire financial straights. The small, one chapel funeral home has occupied the ground floors of an apartment building in the South Bronx for more than fifty years. The facility has not been renovated in decades and it is, to borrow one director’s description, “a little ratty.” At one time, Armstrongs put on 300 funerals per year. By mid 2012, they put on 30. With four funeral directors on the payroll and the financial insecurity of the rental agreement not to mention the relatively low cost funerals they put on, this was not a tenable situation.

³⁸ Eyes, with their high fluid content, are quick to decompose, so the disks are nearly always used to keep the shape.

REFERENCES

- Abbott, Andrew. 1981. "Status and Status Strain in the Professions." *American Journal of Sociology* 86(4): 819-835.
- Abbott, Andrew. 2001 "Professions." *Sociology of, In International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. 12166-12169. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (eds), Pergamon, Oxford.
- Aldrich, Howard, John Cater, Trevor Jones, David Mc Evoy, and Paul Velleman. 1985. "Ethnic residential concentration and the protected market hypothesis." *Social Forces* 63:996-1009.
- Ariès, Philippe. *The hour of our death*. Vintage, 1982.
- Ashforth, Blake E., and Glen E. Kreiner. 2014. "Dirty Work and Dirtier Work: Differences in Countering Physical, Social, and Moral Stigma." *Management and Organization Review* 10(1), 81-108.
- Ashforth, Blake E., and Glen E. Kreiner. 1999. "How Can You Do It?": Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity." *The Academy of Management Review* 24(3):413-34.
- Bearman, Peter. 2009. *Doormen*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bigelow, Allen Gilman 1886. "Cremation and Christianity." *The North American Review* 143: 353-359.
- Blauner, Robert. 1966. "Death and Social Structure." *Psychiatry* 29(4): 378-394.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1958. "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position." *Pacific Sociological Review* 1.1: 3-7.
- Bogardus, Emory S. 1925. "Social Distance and Its Origins." *Sociology and Social Research* 9:216-25.
- Bowman, Leroy. 1959. *The American Funeral: A Study in Guilt, Extravagance, and Sublimity*. Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press.
- Boyd, Robert. L. 1996. "Demographic Change and Entrepreneurial Occupations: African Americans in Northern Cities." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 55(2): 129-143.
- Boyd, Robert L. 1998. "Black Undertakers in Northern Cities during the Great Migration: The Rise of an Entrepreneurial Occupation." *Sociological Focus* 31(3): 249-263.
- Bradfield, Cecil D., and R. Ann Myers. 1980. "Clergy and Funeral directors: An Exploration in Role Conflict." *Review of Religious Research*: 343-350.

- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Funeral Service Workers, <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/personal-care-and-service/funeral-service-occupations.htm> (visited January 15, 2018).
- Cahill, Spencer E. 1995. "Some Rhetorical Directions of Funeral Direction: Historical Entanglements and Contemporary Dilemmas." *Work and Occupations* 22(2):115-36.
- Cahill, Spencer E. 1999. "Emotional Capital and Professional Socialization: The Case of Mortuary Science Students (and Me)." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 62:101-116.
- Chevalier, Judith, David E. Harrington, and Fiona Scott Morton. 2013. "Differentiated to Death? Examining the Roles of Proximity and Preference in the Patronage of Co-Ethnic Businesses." Manuscript, Yale University.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 1980. *The Social Reality of Death: Death in Contemporary America*. Addison Wesley Publishing Company.
- DiMaggio, Paul, and H. Louch. 1998. "Socially embedded consumer transactions: for what kinds of purchases do people most often use networks?" *American Sociological Review*:619-37.
- Douglas, Mary. 2003. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Routledge.
- Drake, St. Clair and Horace Cayton. 1945 [1993]. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Drew, Shirley K, Melanie Mills, and Bob M Gassaway. 2007. *Dirty Work: The Social Construction of Taint*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.
- Dunkerley, David. 1975. *Occupations and Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt and the Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems *The negro American family: report of a social study... of 1909 and 1910 of Atlanta University...; together with the proceedings of the 13th Annual Conference for the Study of the Negro problems, held at Atlanta University on Tuesday May the 26th, 1908*. Negro Universities Press, 1908.
- Edelman, Susan. 2018. "The Mortician School Cheating Scandal that Could Ruin City Funeral Homes." *The New York Post* March 10.
- Federal Trade Commission. 1978. *Funeral Industry Practices: final staff report to the Federal Trade Commission and proposed trade regulation rule (16CFR part 453)*. Washington, DC: Federal Trade Commission, Bureau of Consumer Protection.
- Federal Trade Commission 1975. *Funeral Industry Practices: Proposed Trade Regulation Rule and Staff Memorandum*. Division of Special Projects, Bureau of Consumer Protection. Angel, Arthur R.

- Federal Trade Commission, Bureau of Consumer Protection. 1994. *Funeral Rule* – 16 CFR, Part 453. <http://www.ftc.gov>
- Federal Trade Commission. 2006. In the Matter of SCI and Alderwoods. Docket No C-4174
- Federal Trade Commission. 2014. “New York Funeral Home Will Pay \$32,000 to Settle FTC Charges for Funeral Rule Violations.” Press Release, January 8.
- Funeral Consumer Alliance. 2007. “An oversaturated market: An invitation to funeral pricing abuse.” <http://www.funerals.org/newsandblogsmenu/national-issues/an-oversaturated-market>
- Frederick and Strub. 1967. *The Principles and Practice of Embalming*.
- Fulton, Robert L. 1961. "The Clergyman and the Funeral Director: A Study in Role Conflict." *Social Forces* 39(4):317-23.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959/2002. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face to Face Behavior*. Piscataway, NJ: Aldine Transaction.
- Gorer, Geoffrey. 1955. “The Pornography of Death.” *Encounter* 5(4): 49-52.
- Goldthorpe, John H. and Keith Hope. 1972. “Occupational grading and occupational prestige.” *Social Science Information* 11(5):17-73.
- Grusky, David B. and Stephen E. Van Rompaey. 1992. “The Vertical Scaling of Occupations: Some Cautionary Comments and Reflections.” *American Journal of Sociology* 97(6): 1712-1728.
- Grusky, David B. and Jesper B. Sørensen. 1998. "Can class analysis be salvaged?" *American Journal of Sociology* 103(5): 1187-1234.
- Habenstein, Robert and William Lamers. 1996/1955. *The History of American Funeral Directing*. National Funeral Directors Association.
- Harrington, David. 2007. "Markets: Preserving Funeral Markets with Ready-to-Embalm Laws." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21:201-216.
- Henderson, Angelo B. 1997. “Death Watch? Black Funeral Homes Fear a Gloomy Future As Big Chains Move In --- White Companies Target Inner Cities, Churches In Push for New Markets --- Rumors Fly in Los Angeles.” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 18, p A1.

- Horn, Miriam. 1998. "The Death Care Business." *U.S. News & World Report*: 43.
- Howarth, Glennys. 1996. *Last Rites: The Work of the Modern Funeral Director*. Baywood Publishing: Amityville, NY.
- Howarth, Glennys. 2007. "Whatever happened to social class? An examination of the neglect of working class cultures in the sociology of death." *Health Sociology Review* 16(5): 425-435.
- Hughes, Everett C. 1949. "Social Change and Status Protest: An Essay on the Marginal Man." *Phylon* 10(1): 58-65.
- Hughes, Everett C. 1958. *Men and their Work*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Hughes, Everett C. 1970. "The Humble and the Proud: The Comparative Study of Occupations." *The Sociological Quarterly*, 11(2), 147-156.
- Hughes Wright, R. & Hughes, W. B. 2007. *The death care industry: African American cemeteries*. Detroit, MI: Hughes Wright Enterprises.
- Jacobs, Sanford L. 1985. "The most likely to survive -- A Funeral Home or a Florist?" *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, p.25.
- Kephart, William M. 1950. "Status After Death." *American Sociological Review* 15(5): 635-643.
- Kaiser, Robert G. 1967. "Undertakers have 'Unwritten' Pact to Handle Funerals on Racial Basis." *The Washington Post*, February 24.
- Kubasak, Michael W. 1990. *Cremation and the Funeral Director: Successfully Meeting the Challenge*. New York: Avalon Press.
- Laderman, Gary. 2003. *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-century America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Link, Bruce G., and Jo C. Phelan. 2001. "Conceptualizing Stigma." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27: 363-385.
- Livingston, James D., and Jennifer E. Boyd. 2010. "Correlates and Consequences of Internalized Stigma for People Living with Mental Illness: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis." *Social Science & Medicine* 71(12): 2150-2161.
- Long, Thomas G. 2009. "Chronicle of a Death We Can't Accept." *New York Times*, November 1.
- Lucas, Jeffrey W, and Jo C Phelan. 2012. "Stigma and Status The Interrelation of Two Theoretical Perspectives." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 75(4):310-33.

- Major, Brenda, and Laurie T. O'Brien. 2005. "The Social Psychology of Stigma." *Annual Review of Psychology* 56: 393-421.
- McDermott, Monica. 2006. *Working-Class White: The Making and Unmaking of Race Relations*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- McIlwain, Charlton D. 2003. *Death in Black and White: Death, Ritual, and Family Ecology*. NJ: Hampton Press.
- Mitford, Jessica. 1963/2000. *The American Way of Death Revisited*. New York: Knopf Vintage.
- Mitford, Jessica. 1963. "The Undertaker's Racket." *The Atlantic*, June.
- Myrdal, Gunnar. 1944. *An American Dilemma, Volume 2: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Pescosolido, Bernice A., and Jack K. Martin. 2015. "The Stigma Complex." *Annual Review of Sociology* 41: 87-116.
- Pine, Vanderlyn R. 1975. *Caretaker of the Dead: The American Funeral Director*. New York: Halsted Press.
- Prothero, Stephen. 2001. *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- "Restoring Rights Death, Black and White." 1985. *New York Times*, editorial, August 19.
- Rieder, Jonathan. 1985. *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Robbins, Tom. 1998. "Why it Costs so much to Die in N.Y/ Global Firm is Buying Funeral Homes, Raising Prices." *New York Daily News*, November 8.
- Schanberg, Sydney H. 1963. "Funeral Pricing Studied by State." *New York Times*, November 20, p1.
- Service Corps International. 2010. Annual Report Pursuant to Section 13 and 15(d). Houston, TX: Service Corporation International.
- Shinnar, Rachel, Michael Auguilera, Thomas Lyons. 2011. "Co-ethnic markets: Financial penalty or opportunity?" *International Business Review* 20(6): 646-658.
- Shinnar, Rachel and Cheri Young. 2008. "Hispanic Immigrant Entrepreneurs in the Las Vegas Metropolitan Area: Motivations for Entry into and Outcomes of Self-Employment." *Journal of Small Business Management* 46(2): 242-262.
- Sanders, George. 2012. "Branding in the American Funeral Industry." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 12(3):263-282

- Sanders, George. 2009. "'Late' Capital: Amusement and Contradiction in the Contemporary Funeral Industry." *Critical Sociology* 35:447-470.
- Sanders, George. 2010. "The Dismal Trade as Culture Industry." *Poetics* 38:47-68.
- Severo, Richard. 1978. "Funeral Industry is Striving to Improve its Image in Face of Charges of Deception and Abuses of the Public," *New York Times*, April 25.
- Shils, Edward. 1965. "Charisma, Order, and Status." *American Sociological Review* April: 199-213.
- Simpson, R., Slutskaya, N., Lewis, P., & Höpfl, H. (Eds.). 2012. *Dirty Work: Concepts and Identities*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smith, Ronald. 1996. *The Death Care Industry in the United States*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company.
- Smith, Suzanne. 2010. *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Starr, Paul. 1982. *The Social Transformation of American Medicine: The Rise of a Sovereign Profession and the Making of a vast industry*. New York: Basic Books.
- Taylor, Jacquelyn S. 2011. "Unfinished Business: A Study of Leadership and Adaptive Challenges in the Professionalization of Funeral Directors." PhD dissertation, Union Institute and University, Ann Arbor.
- Thompson, William E. 1991. "Handling the Stigma of Handling the Dead: Morticians and Funeral Directors." *Deviant Behavior* 12(4):403-29.
- Torres, David L. 1988. "Professionalism, Variation, and Organizational Survival." *American Sociological Review* 53:380-394.
- Treiman, Donald. J. 1977. *Occupational Prestige in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Academic Press.
- Turner, Stephen. 2003. "Charisma Reconsidered," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 3: 5-26.
- Twain, Mark. 1883/1984. *Life on the Mississippi*. New York: Penguin.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society*. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Warner, W. Lloyd, Marchia Meeker, and Kenneth Eells. 1949. *Social Class in America*. New York: Harper and Row.

Warner, W. Lloyd. 1965. *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Whittaker, William 2005. "Funeral Services: The Industry, Its Workforce, and Labor Standards." *Federal Publications: Paper 206*.

Wilensky, Harold L. 1964. "The Professionalization of Everyone?" *The American Journal of Sociology* 70(2): 137-158.

Wilson, Kendall. 1997. "Grave Condition: The Future of Black-Owned Funeral Homes." *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 12.

Wilson, Kendall. 1997. "Grave Condition: The Future of Black-Owned Funeral Homes." *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 19.

Wirthlin Worldwide. 2005. *A Study of American Attitudes toward Ritualization and Memorialization*. (http://www.sifuneralservices.com/common/cms/documents/2005Wirthlin_A.pdf)

APPENDIX

Human Subjects

This project was approved by the Internal Review Board of Columbia University - protocol #AAA6410. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Names of individuals and funeral homes have been changed.