DISTINCTION IN DEATH: AN ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUALITY, SOCIALITY,

AND BRAND CONSUMPTION IN CONTEMPORARY

AMERICAN FUNERAL PRACTICES

A THESIS IN
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DISTINCTION IN DEATH: AN ANALYSIS OF INDIVIDUALITY, SOCIALITY,

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ABSTRACT

To date, a growing number of contemporary Americans have come to trust that recognizable

commodity brands and personal consumer preferences now provide the best means of

personalizing funerals and communicating individualized distinction on behalf of the dead.

For some, this form of personalization has come to include everything from Mickey Mouse

gravestones to Major League Baseball themed caskets and memorial services. In this study, I

examine how and why the funeral has become, for some Americans, a site for commodity

branding and such seemingly consumer-centric expressions of distinction in times death.

Through observations and interviews with a small number of deathcare professionals and

patrons, I document in this thesis the personal experiences and anecdotes of those directly

involved with these specific mortuary trends. This testimony is then analyzed with regards to

a history of mortuary ritual, research on brand consumption, and most importantly Pierre

Bourdieu's framework for social distinction. As such, this thesis is aimed at understanding

how and why commodities, brands, and consumer preferences have become a meaningful

element in communication of social distinction in some contemporary American funeral

rituals. Yet as my findings suggest, perhaps these consumer-centric, seemingly novel

expressions of individuality are indeed not as personal as one might initially assume.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have

examined a thesis titled "Distinction in Death: An Analysis of Individuality, Sociality, and

Brand Consumption in Contemporary American Funeral Practices," presented by Nathan R.

Driskill, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy

of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, it seems that American funeral practices have become increasingly focused on the idea of "personalization." Although both broadly and vaguely defined, personalized funerals are often identified by any means of incorporating into the funeral certain symbols or even material goods that were once specific to the personal life of the recently deceased. As such, personalization may, indeed, occur in a variety of ways. Some personalized funerals may include slide shows and video clips that portray the story of the deceased's life, while others might incorporate his or her favorite song or poem. Beyond this, however, for a small-but-growing number of funeral professionals and patrons, it appears that the personalized funeral has become a means of expressing brand loyalty as well as broader consumer preferences.

Recent Trends

Whether marketed by the funeral industry or personally designed by the brand-conscious "do-it-yourself consumer," an increasing number of mortuary goods (such as burial caskets, cremation urns, and grave markers) can now be found to display any number of easily recognizable commodity brands. Thus, some United States funeral product manufacturers now offer caskets and grave markers adorned with Star Trek logos and Disney characters (see figure 1), as well as cremation urns and flower arrangements shaped like Harley Davidson motorcycles (see figure 2) and sports team mascots.

For some people the decision to purchase a "branded" funeral product is a believed necessity. As one St. Louis, Missouri man recalls when describing his son's death, "There was no doubt in my mind that I'd get him a Cardinals casket because that's what he would have wanted…we live the Cardinals" (see figure 3) (Seminara 2010:1). When certain branded funeral products are not available, however, some consumers have chosen to improvise. Such is the case of the Chicago man who personally contracted a local graphics company to decorate his otherwise plain burial casket to resemble a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, his lifelong favorite beer (see figure 4).[1] And whether or not one's preferred brand is available in a casket or urn, the display of brands now frequently carries over into the "performance" of the funeral service as well. Of the "things that helped describe her husband," one Arizona woman chose to celebrate her deceased husband's love of the Rolling Stones by designing for him a themed funeral service that required each guest to wear Rolling Stones logoed clothing and listen to the band's music (Pancrazio 2007).

On the other hand, some funeral consumers have chosen to incorporate into the funeral certain products or themes that correspond to a particular category of goods, services, or industries found within broader consumer markets. That is, rather than incorporate the actual name or logo of the deceased's preferred brand, such as NASCAR or the Kansas City Chiefs, a funeral product or performance may take on a more general theme that relates back to that specific brand or commodity. In this way, a NASCAR-logoed casket becomes a casket shaped like a non-descript racecar, while the Kansas City Chiefs themed funeral service becomes a mere "football themed" celebration, perhaps reminiscent of a child's themed birthday party.

With regards to these trends, a growing number of American funeral industry

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[1] "Illinois man designs beer can coffin," *USA Today*, May 4, 2008.

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Figure 1. Little Mermaid Headstone,
Ottawa Park Cemetery, Clarkston, Michigan.
Photograph by Beth Santore.

Figure 2. Harley Davidson Flower
Arrangement. Courtesy of Phillips'
Flowers, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 3. St. Louis Cardinals Casket.
Courtesy of Eternal Image, Inc.

Figure 4. Pabst Blue Ribbon Casket.
Photograph by Mary Compton.

professionals have suggested that they are simply offering "what society wants" and what

present-day consumers desire: individuality in funeral arrangements (McCormick 2004:38).

For many, these assumptions are based on the observation that today's consumers—primarily

those of the aging (and dying) baby boomer generation—now hold "fewer attachments" to

convention and religious traditions and therefore care "less about the ritual than the

generations ahead of them" (Hamilton 2010:1; Leland 2006:1). Likewise, these professionals

argue that, "Today's consumer wants things personal, specific to their lifestyle," and now

desire funerals that "reflect their lives and tastes" (or the lives and tastes of their departed

loved ones) (Leland 2006: 2; Pancrazio 2007: 1). As a result, both independent and

mainstream deathcare professionals have started to develop a philosophy that reflects these

changing consumer expectations. As such, many now argue that funeral services today

should reflect all styles of individualized "tastes and protocol" and thus "focus more on how

the deceased is represented" as an individual (Mark A. Jones, quoted in McCormick

2004:21).

For the general public, these newly developing funeral products and practices might

seem absurd or perhaps even distasteful. For the deathcare professionals and patrons

involved, however, it is believed that the deceased is a distinct individual imbued with unique

tastes and a personal lifestyle that should be articulated in the event of his or her death. As

such, this growing number of professionals and patrons has come to trust that commodity

brands and themes as well as consumer preferences provide a pinnacle means of

personalization and individual distinction in times of death. Up to now, no known social or

cultural research has attempted to understand how and why the funeral has become, for some

Americans, a site for commodity branding and such seemingly consumer-centric expressions

of distinction. As a result, the aim of this research project is to provide a point of entry for just such an understanding.

Current Research

   While no one else has yet to research the use of brands and consumer themes as a means of communicating distinction in death, a couple of researchers have attempted to explore similar consumer-centric developments in contemporary American funeral practices. Unfortunately, however, I find that their perspectives focus too broadly on either the institution of the American funeral industry or the demographics of its consumers. In doing so, these investigations overlook the social meaning that commodity brands, consumer preferences, and or otherwise personalized funeral products and practices might possess for some people—living or dead.

   In a first-hand attempt to explore recent "personalized" funeral trends in the United States, journalist Lisa Takeuchi Cullen embarked on an investigative tour across the United States, attending funerals and wakes, participating in industry conventions, and interviewing funeral professionals as well as the dying and the bereaved. In her subsequent book, *Remember Me: A Lively Tour of the New American Way of Death* (2006), Cullen argues that the novel personalized funeral products and practices of her findings are the result of demographic changes in the United States (rather than the changes in general consumer expectations). Amongst other things, she notes the high number of baby boomer deaths expected in the coming years (which is projected to reach 4.1 million by the year 2040), and cites industry sources that indicate between 62 and 71 percent of boomers desire "personalized" or "non-traditional" in funerals of some kind (Cullen 2006: 98; 20). In

offering her own opinion amidst her observations, Cullen suggests that these seemingly

boomer-driven funeral practices celebrate individual lives as a means of providing piece of

mind and comfort for the bereaved, as well as for anyone who might have planned his or her

own funeral. To this, Cullen (2006) writes:

> The celebration is an antidote to the extreme and sudden loneliness many of us
> envision as death. We want to gather all of the people who loved us and knew us and
> maybe even admired us to accompany us one last time. ...Even the most forward-
> thinking, tradition-despising survivor finds some value in ceremony (208).

Here, as Cullen draws more from her observations than opinions, it seems that she has

stumbled on to something worth noting: These seemingly "personalized" and "non-

traditional" funerals actually mirror other, more "traditional," funerals that seem to

encompass a great deal of sociality. Yet, although she seems to acknowledge the importance

of social bonds and the value of ceremony in recent funeral trends, interestingly enough,

Cullen concludes by arguing that "the new American way of death is personal," and thus,

thanks to the baby boomer generation, funerals in America today have become little more

than celebrations of individuality (ibid.). Unfortunately, Cullen admits that her research for

the book was influenced by an earlier article she wrote for Time Magazine—who charged her

with the task of researching novel baby boomer funeral trends in the United States (ibid.).

Thus, working from the preconceived notion that boomers are the source of all trends novel

and personal, Cullen falls into a methodological pitfall of selective bias. Indeed, she chose to

observe and interview only members of the boomer generation, thus swaying her findings in

favor of discovering funeral phenomena fueled by radical boomer self-expression. In doing

so, she fails to grasp why these funerals might be important not only to certain individuals

but also to all other people observing or involved.

Surprisingly, perhaps, it is difficult to find social scientific research that examines any recent form of commodity-branded, consumer-themed, and/or personalized funeral practices. To be sure, George Sanders appears to be the only known social scientist—other than myself—that is attempting to use empirical research as a means to understand the origins and motivations behind some current funeral trends in the United States. Sanders's research focuses primarily on the American funeral industry itself, to which he suggests that American consumers (regardless of a generational profile) are not entirely responsible for the development of branded and themed funeral products and practices.

In a recent study, Sanders (2009) argues that the American funeral industry operates as a "culture industry" in the way it forms and prescribes the meaning, style, and use of particular funerary goods and services. Drawing upon Horkheimer and Adorno's (1944 [2002]) notion that a culture industry mass-produces goods that are then used to manipulate and subjugate society's masses into passive, mindless consumers, Sanders argues (among other things) that the American funeral industry has produced such consumer-centric products and practices as a new way to manufacture, commodify, commercialize, and capitalize upon the way in which Americans think about and experience life and death. Here Sanders notes that "tradition, ritual, and even individual's relationships with the dead are being manufactured, shaped, and sold in light of broader social structures," namely corporatization and consumer capitalism (2009: 64). Yet, rather than suggest that the American funeral industry is actually subjugating masses of people into passive, mindless consumers through novel funeral trends, Sanders suggests that the funeral industry as a culture industry is responsible for changing consumers' perception of death and what is deemed "sacred." In closing, Sanders argues that, "In addition to matters of death, memory,

and life…[the funeral industry as culture industry] shapes how society cares for, remembers, and considers and re-considers loved ones who are both alive and deceased" (2009: 65).

Indeed, Sanders's case for the mainstream American funeral industry as a culture industry provides a compelling counter argument for those who might suggest that it is the funeral industry that has changed its pitch to suit the ever-evolving American consumer. Nevertheless, I contend that his research otherwise fails to fully address the effects of this culture industry. Sanders claims that the funeral industry has shaped how consumers now perceive death and mortuary ritual, and thus how they consider and care for the living as well as the dead. Yet, his research stops at exploration of the various ways these changes have manifest in consumers' actions, namely with the actual funerals they purchase and perform. Although Sanders places emphasis on the commodification and consumer centrism of modern funeral practices, he overlooks why it might be important for some consumers to now incorporate preferred brands and commodities into funeral products and performances. By focusing all too much on the influence of the American funeral industry, Sanders fails to address the social meaning that these seemingly consumer centric funeral practices possess for some people. Like Cullen, Sanders misses the opportunity to examine the ways in which commodities, brands, and consumer preferences—influenced by the industry or not—are used to manage identity and forms of expression, as well as negotiate social relationships in events of death.

A Different Approach

As previously indicated, the purpose of this thesis is to examine how and why the funeral has become, for some Americans, a site for commodity branding and seemingly

consumer centric expressions of distinction in times death. While there is little research to provide guidance on the subject matter, what research does exist, however, provides this study with a point of departure and approach that will allow for the exploration and analysis of uncharted phenomena. As such, the intended result of this research is to provide new and essential knowledge on the use and meaning of commodity-branded, consumer-themed, and otherwise "personalized" funeral products and practices in contemporary America.

This primary point of departure for this research study is predicated upon a search for meaning. Neither Sanders nor Cullen nor any other journalist or industry professional has attempted to understand how and why commodities, brands, and consumer preferences have become a meaningful element for some people during rituals and events of death. As such, why do these people perceive that certain consumer objects and symbols provide the best means of expressing the individuality of the deceased? Why is the expression of individuality in death, in-and-of-itself, even important? Yet, with these questions in mind, this study must not fail to consider another important element: sociality. What social meaning do these commodity-branded and consumer-themed funerals practices hold for some people? As mentioned, Cullen, Sanders, and others have unfortunately failed to fully address the common conception that funerals are often inherently social events (Malinowski [1925] 1954; Hertz [1907] 1960; Van Gennep [1909] 1960; Durkheim [1912]; Radcliff-Brown [1922] 1964). Thus, the topic of sociality and the assumed dichotomy of the individual and the social is a main point of contention throughout this entire thesis.

In keeping with these questions and directives, the following chapter of this thesis begins by addressing the previously formulated notion that personalization, and thus individuality, in death is both novel and central to contemporary American funeral practices

(see Hamilton 2010; Leland 2006; Pancrazio 2007). Here, I provide a survey of history and ethnography on mortuary rituals and practices that speaks to the contrary. This is followed by a discussion of the theory and research regarding the relationship between lifestyle, taste, and consumption; here, particular attention is given to Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) framework for distinction. The result is a synthesis of literature that aims to provide perspective on various ways in which social distinctions are communicated in life and in death. Methodologically, the goal of this study is to qualitatively examine and understand personal expression, social relationships, cultural practices, and the meaning applied to certain objects and symbols in times of death. As such, data collected and analyzed for this study comes from primary and secondary-sourced interviews and observations with a small group of non-mainstream deathcare professionals and the friends and families of those for whom a branded and/or themed funeral was performed. Subsequently, my analysis and conclusions reveal that perhaps some consumer-centric and arguably novel means of expressing conceptions of individuality in death are indeed not as personal as one might initially assume.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY AND THEORY

Mortuary Rituals and Practices

While some may suggest that the desire for self-expression in death is a recent

development in United States, to survey mortuary practices of America's past is to reveal that

personalization and the expression of lifestyle are not historically uncommon themes in the

American way of death. Author and Ohio funeral director Mac McCormick (2004) contends

that many of the personalized funeral customs that we maintain in America today can be

traced back to our own cultural roots; he notes that early colonial American funerals would

often use personal possessions as a means to pay a "highly personalized tribute to the dead"

(20). However, in comparing American funeral trends—of the past and present—to those of

various cultures around the world and throughout time, one finds that the representation of

personal expression is not necessarily a new or wholly American phenomenon. For

thousands of years humans have enacted rituals and constructed edifices of death intended to

honor the past life and personality of the dead. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans

are certainly well known for constructing monuments intended to honor specific persons of

royalty and nobility, or of general higher social standing. The Pyramids of Giza in Egypt are

perhaps the best recognized of these ancient mortuary monuments.

Importantly, an awareness of such apparent similarities between seemingly divergent

cultural practices indeed gives reason to further compare the human treatment of death

throughout time, space, and culture. As Metcalf and Huntington (1991) suggest, a

comparative understanding of the various ways in which humans have responded to and

ritualized death over time will provide us with a better understanding our own, present, treatment of death. Importantly, however, no attempt should be made to render any "panhuman" universal assumptions about death and mortuary practice (Metcalf and Huntington 1991: 74-75). Rather, the aim should be comparisons that cast into relief the particular ways in which death is treated differently within context of a specific cultural, ideological, social, and economic system (ibid.).

The American Way of Death

Although McCormick (2004) gives indication that self-expression and personalization in the American way of death are as old as American culture itself, historian James Farrell (1980) argues that the expression of personalization and lifestyle through rituals of death did not become widely popular phenomenon until America entered the modern world. During the middle to late nineteenth century, modernized cemeteries provided a novel means for affluent individuals to "discriminate between themselves and the lower classes" (Ferrall 1980: 110-111). Here the particular size, material, and finish of a grave marker were used to signify the social class, power, and/or status of the deceased, as well as his or her family (see Ferrall 1980; Warner 1959). Later, as retailers such as the Sears and Roebuck Company began selling high end, ornate grave markers at low prices, this form of affluent expression was eventually co-opted by a broader market of consumers. An early Sears and Roebuck catalogue suggests to these consumers that "the stately effect" of their monuments, "even the smallest size, will attract the attention of all observers and surpass anything surrounding it in the cemetery" (1902: 51).

Due in part to changes in aesthetic design, twentieth century grave markers became a lessened means of class distinction. Rather, as C.D. Abby Collier's (2003) research suggests, grave markers became an evolving means of personal expression via the physical symbols that were carved into the stones. Until roughly 1960, grave marker symbolism in America was largely used to communicate the deceased's ties to "social institutions," such as religion, marriage/kinship, military/patriotism, organizational membership (*e.g.*, the Freemasons, the Eastern Star, etc.), and/or general funerary traditions (*e.g.*, ivy, floral designs, etc.) (Collier 2003). However, following 1960 much of this symbolism grew to reflect images that expressed the deceased's personal interests and hobbies, such as golfing or hunting or knitting (ibid.). In short, Collier's research suggests that this shift in gravesite symbolism reveals a cultural move away from institutional values toward an increased emphasis on the expression of individualism and self-identity (ibid.). Indeed, the communication of grave marker symbolism would shift again during the twenty-first century as the use of "branded symbolism" developed into a means of symbolic expression in death—which is the topic of this present study.[2]

In regards to the performance of the funeral, as the custom of the "viewing" (a display of the deceased's remains) became more popular during the early twentieth century, some families went so far as to display one's body in a manner befitting his or her previous lifestyle. Philippe Ariés (1981) describes an early case in which the body of a man was presented in a "in a tableau as if he were still alive, at his desk, in his armchair…with a cigar

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[2] Collier's failure to gather data on branded grave markers, and thus develop a classification of "branded symbolism," is perhaps due to the time and place in which her data was collected. Although my own research does indicate that branded grave markers were available prior to two thousand-three (the time of Collier's research), it is known that these products were relatively limited in use and availability at that time. Furthermore, it is unknown whether or not the geographical location of Collier's research (Georgia, U.S.A) would have affected her ability to observe such grave markers. Collier simply takes into account how consumerism can influence such individualism.

in his mouth" (599). Although a rare occasion in the early part of the century, this custom

became more apparent during the nineteen-seventies and eighties as the viewing developed

into more of a personalized motif. Here, one notable example includes a boxing ring that was

installed into a Burbank, CA funeral chapel for the viewing of a local prizefighter (Rivenburg

2002). Today, however, a growing number of personalized viewings and wakes often include

the display of consumer brands and preferences, such as the case of the Pittsburgh Steelers

football fan who was reclined in his own living room chair, dressed in traditional Steelers'

colors, and draped with a blanket bearing the team's logo during his viewing.

During the nineteen-eighties the Batesville Casket Company began to innovate some

of the first ever patented and mass-produced personalized burial products in the United

States. With product features like an optional shelf for the display of personal possessions

and selectable ornaments used to decorate casket corners (both in production today),

Batesville aimed to offer consumers a "subtle way to highlight the interests and personality"

of the deceased via the modification of his or her "interment vessel" (see

www.batesville.com). However, some argued (including most of the funeral industry

informants for this study) that these prefabricated features don't necessarily allow consumers

to freely and accurately express their unique lifestyles and individual tastes. As a result, at

the turn of the twenty-first century a small number of more progressive funeral professionals

began to market funerary options aimed to more accurately celebrate the personal interests of

consumers. For instance, in 2003 F & F Metal Products began producing the Art Casket,

which is a line of conventional steel caskets wrapped in vinyl murals that depict hobbyist

subject matter such as hunting, golfing, bike racing, and fishing (Interview with Gail Rust;

also see www.artcaskets.com). Other companies would follow this trend (see

www.hotrodcaskets.com; www.creativecoffins.com) applying this same hobbyist symbolism to caskets and urns that Collier (2003) discovered on grave markers. Soon this trend would be followed by the application of consumer brands to mass-produced caskets and urns—as detailed below.

Despite recent contention that a newly developing desire for self-expressed individualism has only recently influenced the American attitude toward death and funeral practices (see Cullen 2007; Hamilton 2010; Leland 2006; Pancrazio 2007), this brief history reveals that personalization and self-expression are long-standing components of the American way of death. Here one finds that personal possessions, funeral performances, mortuary objects, and gravesite symbolism have long provided individuals with a means of distinguishing their personal lifestyle and interests from those of other people, both living and dead.

Yet, it must be noted that personal expression is not exclusive to American funeral practices; similar characteristics can be easily located in other mortuary rituals around the world. In searching for specific points of comparison—so as to distinguish how death is (or is not) treated differently within our own society and culture—it is not difficult to find contemporary examples of mortuary rituals that appear to share parallel qualities with the commodity-branded and consumer-themed funerals examined in this present study. To be sure, two distinctive funeral practices found in Ghana, West Africa, are often cited when examining the role of commodification and consumption in other funeral practices around the world.

Cultural Comparisons and Perspectives

For over fifty years now, the Ga people of Ghana have been burying their dead in "fantasy coffins," which are hand-made, meticulously carved, brightly painted folk-art caskets designed to symbolize certain "personal characteristics and attributes" of the deceased (see www.ghanacoffin.com). Here, carefully chosen objects—such as consumer commodities—are used to symbolize one aspect of the deceased's previously lived personal life (Griffiths 2000: 9). For instance, the coffin of a shoe manufacturer might be carved and painted to resemble a Nike tennis shoe, while a successful businessman might be buried in a coffin made to look like a Mercedes Benz automobile—the most symbolically prestigious car in Ghana (Griffiths 2000; Burns 1974). Yet, the use of such symbolism indicates that these coffins are also used to negotiate social relationships by displaying the deceased's social standing within the community. As Hannah Griffiths' (2000) research points out, to be buried in a Fantasy Coffin is a great honor for Ga people, and thus only those who have been successful and who are the most highly respected members of their society will be buried in such a manner (10-11). To be buried in a fantasy coffin is to communicate to others that you are a person of prominence within the community, and thus worthy of such distinction in death. However, it is important to note that the family and friends of the deceased are meant to decide the form and symbolism that most appropriately befits the lived experiences and social standing of their dead friend and relative (ibid.). Hence, the act of deciding the best way to physically and symbolically honor a loved one and/or member of the community provides the living with an opportunity to maintain certain social and familial bonds and values.

For the Asante people of Ghana, funeral rituals provide the living and the dead with a similar occasion for personal expression, familial bonds, and social display; however, Asante funerals offer a more explicit negotiation of social identities through a ritualized and conspicuous expression of material and symbolic wealth (Bonsu and Belk 2003: 47). When an individual dies in Asante, the family and friends of the deceased gather together to plan and perform an extravagant funeral that includes dancing and drumming; music and poetry; photographs of the deceased displayed on T-shirts and posters and in video collages; lavish feasts; the public exchange of expensive gifts; and even the public announcement of the family's funeral expenses, amongst other things (see Bonsu and Belk 2003; de Witte 2003). As a way of honoring the deceased, on the one hand, these funeral practices are intended to refine the deceased's social image (ibid.). As Bonsu and Belk (2003) suggest, Asante funerals have the ability to underplay the deceased's previous lifestyle and thus renegotiate his or her identity after death by displaying the aspects of material and symbolic consumption that are consistent with a "well-lived life" (47). It could be said that such a display reveals a form of "aspirational consumption": the purchase and presentation of conspicuous goods and symbols so as to present an artificial image of social mobility. However, given that such conspicuous expression is made possible by the amount of time, energy, and, most importantly, money that is spent on the funeral by the family, it is important to note that Asante funerals are intended to benefit the social image of the living as well. As Marleen de Witte's (2003) research reveals, Asante funerals are designed so that the relatives of the dead may publicly display wealth and unity in a competition for status and distinction on behalf of the deceased's entire family (534). In this way, funerals are more than a sentiment of honor and devotion for the deceased, they are "a show of family wealth and self congratulation"

that determines a whole family's social standing within the entire community (535). In these instances, de Witte (2003) notes that money and commodification are used to affirm social relationships and group identities by not only determining social boundaries but by also providing an occasion for the living to reflect upon and negotiate the most important values of life and society (554).

Certainly these two examples are not meant to be exhaustive—many other mortuary practices could have been described. Again, the goal here is to provide points of comparison to our own practices in the United States, so as to determine the particular ways in which death is treated within various social and cultural systems so as to distinguish how death is—or is not—treated differently within our own society and culture (see Metcalf and Huntington 1991). On the one hand, these instances are simply noted in order to illustrate that the characteristics of American funeral practices are not exclusive to American history and culture. The fantasy coffins of Ga funeral practices are designed to symbolize certain personal characteristics and attributes of the deceased's previous personal life through carefully chosen objects and images, while Asante funerals are intended to refine the deceased's social image by means of material and symbolic consumption, so as to renegotiate his or her identity after death (Griffiths 2000; Bonsu and Belk 2003; de Witte 2003).

However, within these two cultural practices of Ghana, funerals of dead individuals are often used as explicit means to reinforcing social relationships and group identities. For both the Ga and the Asante peoples, expressing the lived experiences and the (actual or aspired) social standing of a dead individual is an essential method of negotiating certain social and familial bonds, maintaining the important values of life and society, as well as determining the social standing of an entire family within a community. On the other hand,

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then, these comparisons have been given so as to further illustrate that similar aspects of sociality and social display are just as apparent in the history of American mortuary practices.

If we give closer examination to the history of American mortuary practices, we find that these funeral products and performances also provide a means of negotiating social relationships and group identities. Often it seems that these social elements go hand-in-hand with expressions of individuality; and comparable to the described funerals of Ghana, individual distinction appears to be often expressed by highlighting either the divergence or the similarity of social positions between people, living or dead. In one way, the communication of one's seemingly unique social position is expressed as a distancing of oneself from others that are seemingly different in social prestige or class standing—which has been historically expressed by the physical features of gravestones or the extravagance of ones' funeral service (see Ferrall 1980; Warner 1959). In another way, the communication of an individual's social position is also expressed as a means of relating to those who are understood to be of a similar social position. While this can be expressed through a shared taste for elegant or extravagant gravestones, for example, such reinforcement of social and even familial bonds seems to be historically located in a post-mortem affiliation with certain social institutions such as fraternal organizations comprised of seemingly "like-minded-people" (Collier 2003). With all of this in mind, it can be said that the decision to create individuality by distinguishing oneself from others in times of death, in any capacity, requires awareness of one's place or position in a world of others—whether it be an awareness of difference or similarity.

Although only a few examples, in sum these instances provided us with a picture of the total system that is the funeral ritual. Within the funeral the individual represents only a part of the whole. While the deceased as an individual is often the focus of the funeral—at least within the examples provided here—individual spectators, celebrants, officiants, and the rest each represent a part of the whole, or the group. As groups and communities we attend wakes, burials, and memorial services of individuals *together*, often as families and friends with shared life experiences and cultural inflections. Even as a nation we *collectively* honor fallen soldiers and leaders, and *together* we share in the mourning of dead celebrities. In this way, rituals of death often provide a means for individuals to connect and/or reconnect with others as a social entity. However, because attention is often concentrated on the deceased individual in the event of a death, and thus not on the group as a whole, the public is not necessarily always conscious of the way in which events, such as funerals, maintain such a part-whole relationship.

Importantly, it is not a new idea that mortuary rituals possess inherently social elements; over the years a number of anthropologists and social theorists have suggested that cultural practices subsequent to death are, indeed, social processes (Malinowski [1925] 1954; Hertz [1907] 1960; Van Gennep [1909] 1960; Durkheim [1912]; Radcliff-Brown [1922] 1964). In Hertz's ([1907] 1960) study of the "collective representation of death," he explicitly describes death as a social phenomenon, and thus an "object of collective representation" that holds a "specific social meaning for the social consciousness" (27). More specifically, Malinowski ([1925] 1954) describes that although death is often perceived as a "private act," when it occurs it is immediately transformed into a "public event." This is to say that death not only signals a biological and/or ontological transition of an individual,

death also causes a shift in the group dynamic. Following death, relatives and community members gather to mourn the dead and care for the body, often in the form of ritual and/or celebration. For instance, while individuals in Asante culture are fully responsible for their own lives, the family, however, is responsible for the dead; as such, the family and friends of the deceased gather together to prepare and perform highly elaborate funerals (Bonsu and Belk 2003: 44). These rituals indicate acts of "self-preservation" on behalf of the group; death is, at base, a threat to the cohesion, the organization, and the tradition of a society and of an entire culture, and thus mortuary rituals provide reinforcement of social solidarity and group cohesion (Malinowski 1954[1925]: 34-35). Likewise, van Gennep ([1907] 1960) observed that just as some cultures maintain rites of separation for the dead from society and the world, many cultures also perform important rites of incorporation that, amongst other things, reunite living members of the group with each other and with the deceased.

It is also important to note the ways in which physical objects can also play a role in self-expression and social processes of death. Monuments, internment vessels, and even personal possessions often provide means of communicating individual expression and distinction as well as maintaining group identity and social solidarity. In many contemporary Western societies, material objects such as toys, holiday decorations, household items, and consumer goods are sometimes incorporated into mortuary rituals and processes of grief, mourning, and remembrance. To these practices, Hallam and Hockey (2001) suggest that such material objects and possessions present themselves as something "permanent" in an otherwise impermanent society and culture, thus providing "a sense of temporal and spatial 'anchoring'" and a visible quality of endurance when observed alongside materials that are meant to physically decay, such as coffins and corpses (203, 205, 212; also see Huyssen

1995). In doing so, they argue that these objects and possessions are able to "construct a sense of enduring personhood" for deceased individuals (Hallam and Hockey 2001: 209; 210; 211). Yet, with most everything else involved with rituals and processes of grief, mourning, and remembrance, these items are also used so that the living may relate to the dead and "provide for the bereaved very real sensations of contact with the deceased" (Ibid., 209). In sum, Hallam and Hockey contend that by bringing together various objects that are "highly attuned to individuals' perceived biographies and social identities," material displays of mortuary practice maintain "a social presence of the deceased" (ibid.).

While these comparisons and perspectives on the history and practices of death are in no way intended to be conclusive, working through even a few of the particular ways in which death is treated within various cultural systems and times can allow us to determine how death might be treated differently within our own society and culture (see Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Here, what seems to remain in contrast for funeral practices of contemporary America are the use and incorporation of commodities, brands, and consumer preferences, and their relationship to perceived expressions of lifestyle, taste, and distinction in times of death.

Lifestyle, Taste, and Distinction

Perhaps one of the most important empirical analyses of lifestyle and taste can be found in Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction*. In general, taste is often regarded as a personal preference for various kinds of clothing, food, art, music, and, in this case, funeral products and performances. In *Distinction*, however, Bourdieu argues that personal tastes, and the lifestyles associated with them, provide an important means of not only personal but

also social distinction. Bourdieu shows that taste not only represents individuals'

classificatory systems of perception, appreciation, and differentiation of various cultural

objects and/or practices in relation to how goods and practices are consumed; but also, how

lifestyle and taste also provide people with a means of perceiving, appreciating, and

differentiating themselves and others. What makes Bourdieu's schema most important is the

extent to which he illustrates how lifestyle, taste, and distinction are indeed a matter of

cultural inflection, social positioning, and practice.

A taste for art is Bourdieu's preferred example of how individuals draw distinctions

between, and thereby classify, different objects and practices. Here, Bourdieu suggests that

one's taste could be identified not only by his or her preference for, say, an original

landscape painting by Claude Monet (versus that of a mass-produced landscape print), but

also in his or her ability to distinguish between the two. It is perhaps obvious, however, that

not everyone always, if ever, shares in similar aesthetic judgments and preferences. This is

because taste is not a matter of individual whim, but rather one's taste is predisposed to the

economic, cultural, and social conditions in which he or she was raised and educated. To use

Bourdieu's language, taste is influenced by one's "habitus," distribution of capital, and thus

his or her social position within a hierarchical class structure.

Bourdieu's notion of habitus represents systems of unconscious, internalized

"dispositions" that provide social agents with the "mental, or cognitive, structures" by which

they organize their own behavior as well as perceive the behaviors of others (see

Bourdieu1984). It is through these dispositions that people perceive, think about, act within,

and thus navigate the social world: habitus represents our embodiment of the social world,

revealed in our aspirations and preferences. For instance, one's habitus is directly linked to

his or her liking, or "taste," for paintings by Claude Monet over mass-produced prints, or even for NASCAR races rather than opera performances. As a system of dispositions dependent upon one's social position, habitus represents the embodiment of one's capital. From Bourdieu's (1986) perspective, capital is the resource that enables one to accumulate some manner of physical or symbolic "profit," which arises out of one's participation in a given form of capital. Bourdieu (1986; 1993) denotes four forms of capital: *economic* (wealth and income), *social* (the accumulation of various resources by virtue of group membership), *cultural* (social skills, education, tastes, material goods), and *symbolic* (the use of symbols to create and solidify social realities, usually in the pursuit of honor or prestige). Social position, then, is illustrated by both the quantity as well as quality of capital that an individual, group, or institution obtains within the social world (ibid.). One's overall quantity and quality of capital (in all forms) varies over time, and it is such variation in habitus, when charted by others, that gives indication as to the manner in which an individual arrived at his or her present social position.

In strongly influencing all other forms of capital, cultural capital represents an individual's cultural knowledge and competency of the external world, and as such provides him or her with a means of navigating the external world (see Bourdieu 1993). That is to say, if the external world is considered to be a code of cultural materials and symbols (*e.g.*, art, music, literature, sports and leisure, etc.), then it is an individual's cultural capital that provides him or her with the knowledge and the capacity (*i.e.*, the tools) to first decode (*e.g.*, appreciate and understand the meaning of a piece of art) and then communicate the decoded information with others (*i.e.*, socialize with others of similar cultural capital and dispositions) (Bourdieu 1984; 1986). Thus, an individual who lacks the cultural capital necessary to

"uncode" a specific piece of music or artwork, for instance, will feel, as Bourdieu (1984) describes, "lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythm, colors and lines, without rhyme or reason" (2). This is because such cultural knowledge and competency is not only learned, but is as relative to one's social position as habitus and other forms of capital.

As mentioned, habitus varies from person to person depending upon one's unique position within the social world. And while not everyone has the same habitus, social agents with similar social experiences, and who might share a similar social position, can indeed share habitus. As such, Bourdieu (1990) suggests that habitus might explain why two individuals, previously unknown to one another, but of similar socio-economic background, for instance, might feel a kindred connection or share similar dispositions (perhaps for NASCAR races, to use the previous example). When an individual expresses his or her tastes or classifies an object in a particular way, he or she reveals a great deal about his or her background and relative position within the social world. Hence, beyond a means of classifying various objects and practices, taste also provides the basis by which "one classifies oneself and is classified by others" (Bourdieu 1984:56). Bourdieu argues that taste provides individuals with a sense of place in the social world, guiding them toward the cultural goods and practices and social positions that befit their relative wants, needs, and dispositions (ibid., 466). This means that for people who share similar backgrounds and dispositions, adherence to a certain taste "forges the unconscious unity of a class," or, more generally, provides a means for group distinction (ibid., 77). In this way, then, individuals and groups tend to define themselves in opposition to one another, wherein tastes are used to classify others by way of identifying difference and creating distance. It is in such a way that

Bourdieu argues tastes are justified and asserted as the "refusal of other tastes"—which is to say that one's tastes are indeed "the distastes…of the tastes of others" (ibid., 56).

Following this conception of taste, Bourdieu explains that one's "lifestyle" is the unifying pattern, or system, of his or her classifiable practices and distinctive tastes (ibid., 171). As such, lifestyle can be understood as a socially qualified system of signs that are perceived by others as a system of social differences (ibid., 171-175). This means that as individuals and groups surround themselves with symbols, objects, and practices to which they are socially and culturally disposed (such as clothing styles, food and drink preferences, and forms of entertainment), and as a consequence systematically manifest and communicate their differences and distinctions from one another (Bourdieu 1984:173). In matters of difference and distinction, then, Bourdieu is most concerned with the topic of class identity and the manner in which tastes, and the lifestyles attached to them, orient and represent different hierarchical status positions within the social order. He argues that, "Taste [and thereby, lifestyle] is a practical mastery of distributions which makes it easy to intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall—and therefore befit—an individual [or group] occupying a given position in social space" (ibid., 466). In other words, Bourdieu argues that every consumer choice and every consumer ritual is consequently defined by all possible configurations of "social moves and constraints" that relate back to the consumer's social class standing (see Slater 1997:163). Thus, distinctions drawn out by taste and lifestyle are both a consequence and an expression of class distinction.

Lifestyle, Consumption, and Branding

While Bourdieu's schema does well to relate conceptions of "personal" taste and lifestyle patterning to a range of possible consumer practices and choices, some recent scholarship on consumption observes consumer lifestyle today as being less heavily weighted by visible class structures and (hierarchical) status distinctions (Chaney 1996; Dunn 2008; Giddens 1991; Slater 2008[1997]). This is not to say that these theories are mutually exclusive with those of class orientation and structure, and particularly those of Bourdieu. Rather, the suggestion is that contemporary Americans (defined as individuals, groups, or consumers) are not necessarily and always conscious of a class influence on their lifestyles and tastes, and thus they may find other ways of rationalizing their preferences and distinctions.

To this notion, some scholars argue that the United States' current culture of consumption—influenced by new forms of credit, financing, marketing, advertizing, and shopping, as well as by wider income markets and more diversified social and cultural demographics—has contributed to a marketplace that differentiates individuals and groups by lifestyle practices that are centered around stylized, expressive behavior rather than "visible class boundaries" (Dunn 2008:123-128; Featherstone 1991; Slater [1997] 2008). Likewise, such scholars offer that some consumers, often unknowingly, place greater emphasis upon socially perceived *uses* and *styles* of consumer goods and practices that are not based solely or consciously upon monetary or class-coded values (Chaney 1996; Dunn 2008). While use and style can be very much interpreted as "class-coded values," consumers may not always be aware that they are doing is valued in terms of social class. In these cases, material goods and consumer practices may be used to negotiate social positions along a "horizontal axis of

noneconomic criteria" and maintain social distinctions by *out-group* and *in-group* lifestyle

patterns (Dunn 2008:123). Here, individuals and groups will often differentiate themselves

and stake claim to lifestyle practices by cultivating specific kinds of knowledge and/or

appropriating certain material goods that are used as "telling signs" of either social belonging

or discrimination (McCraken 1988:34,75). A consumer's chosen style of clothing or

preferred shopping habits communicate to others whether or not he or she is to be recognized

as "part of the group." In such a way, then, consumer lifestyle can be understood as a mutual

negotiation of "difference" and "conformity." To this notion, Dunn (2008) suggests that

consumer lifestyle today is just as much a way of "carving out an identifiable social slot

within an anonymous mass," as it is a means of facilitating a "tangible and patterned

connection to others" as a "badge of membership in a group or subculture" (130, 156).

Indeed, one manner in which some consumers choose to signify such exclusive and

inclusive distinctions is through the acquisition and display of certain consumer goods and

specific commodity brands. Klein (2010) shows that brands are created to embody particular

meanings that are intended to sell particular ideals and/or lifestyles to consumers. Through

such meaning, some consumers will develop personal identifications, or attachments, with

brands that then communicate to them given ideas about how to live, how to be, and how to

be seen. For the consumer the idea is to display a personal taste or lifestyle preference

through the loyal or habitual sporting of a label or logo (Chaney 1996:108). To this, Holt

(2004) suggests that those consumers are embracing a brand's "identity value," which he

describes by brands that are "imbued with stories that consumers find valuable in

constructing their identities" (3, 4). In these instances, Holt suggests that brands act as

"vessels of self-expression" to which consumers gravitate for help in communicating how

they think about themselves and how they think about their position within the world (Holt 2004:3; Bauman 2007; Klein 2010). As Holt (2004) offers no discussion of class value in brand consumption, it is important to note that his work does not conflict with the argument that use, style, taste, and distinction are nevertheless class-coded. Indeed, many brands are imbued with class-value and are thus consumed and displayed for their class related identity value (see Baudrillard [1998] 2008).

All the same, such brand attachment can, on the one hand, provide consumers with feelings of autonomy and individualized self-expression and thus a means of distinguishing themselves from others. However, just as people form relationships with certain commodities and their brands for reasons of personal expression, it is further suggested that consumers also identify with brands because they embody certain shared ideals or tastes as well. Hence, on the other hand, brands may also provide consumers with a means of social conformity. Bauman (2007) shows that within a society of consumers social bonds tend to be mediated by markets for consumer products wherein the process of self-identification is pursued, and subsequently displayed, through "visible 'marks of belonging'" (82-83). As certain brands become associated with particular lifestyles, they become totems for "social collectives" and "insignias of membership in a lifestyle or group" (Chaney 1996:106; Dunn 2008:181). Holt (2004) explains that brands are saturated with a history of collective consumer experiences, meaning, and "identity value," and thus what makes a brand most powerful is the "collective nature" of consumers' perceptions about the value that the brand holds (2004:1-12). Thus, many consumers continue to identify with or remain loyal to certain brands because they have are locked into a social network of other consumers who share similar loyalties, tastes, and consumer dispositions (ibid., 150).

Consumption and Affect

Holt (2004) is quick to suggest that the most effective brands are those regarded as cultural valuable. He contends that consumers forge attachments to brands not because of their primary emotional value, but rather because of their ability to provide personal identity value and myths of cultural resolution. That is, among other reasons, consumers flock to brands with a value they can use to lessen their own identity burdens and personal anxieties. Such culturally valuable brands, however, also have the ability to create stories, or myths, that smooth over social tensions in response to historical changes and resolve cultural contradictions resulting from collective social anxieties, such as economic strife. Yet, beyond these socio-cultural perspectives on consumption and branding, a further suggestion is that consumers will attach themselves to certain commodities and brands because of an *emotional* pull or connection. Using the term "emotional branding," Gobé ([2001] 2010) argues that the most effective of brands engage consumers in a sensory experience packaged with emotional content and distinctive personality. As such, Gobé posits that effective branding is about consumer interactions that establish connections and build relationships between brands and people, and thus drawing upon senses and feelings as well as emotions and sentiments. Rather than argue Gobé and Holt and others against each other, it is simply important to note that emotional experiences are also found to play a role in the consumption and display of commodity brands. Hence, an analysis of the relationship between consumption and affect could prove to be just as valuable, and even complementary to, a cultural and class-based analysis.

Indeed, some anthropologists suggest that some consumers will align themselves with particular brands, not necessarily to identify with a certain lifestyle, but so as to maintain

intimate and familial social bonds or shared meaning and experiences with others. Miller (1998) suggests that these bonds are constructed and maintained through very specific acts of consumption, which are most importantly expressed by the consumer as both love and devotion toward the other. He argues that consumption, via shopping, "Takes the form of neither subject nor object but of the values to which people wish to dedicate themselves"—*i.e.*, love and devotion (Miller 1998: 12). As an example, Miller draws upon the case of a boy who desired nothing more than a specific, brand name soccer jersey. He explains that the boy's parents are eager to obtain this jersey for him because—interestingly enough—they see it as a key to ensuring his "constitution as a member of his peer group" (Miller 1998: 26). Unable to afford the item, the parents borrow funds from the boy's own savings in order to pay for the jersey. In this case, Miller suggests that, "love takes the more exquisite form of parental anxiety over how the son will be treated if he does not live up to the expectation of his peers" (Miller 1998: 26-27). While there are many consumer experiences that indeed are self-indulgent, with this example Miller provides indication that this is not always the case. He shows that consumers can feel a distinct sense of responsibility in making sure that they purchase what they believe their significant others need in order to maintain a "proper" social existence. Given the present study, the question may be asked whether or not it is believed that this proper social existence must be carried out post-mortem as well.

Like Miller, Foster (2007) suggests that consumers may be dedicated to a certain name brand product not because they were ideologically conditioned to do so, but rather because a brand might call upon intimate social bonds or shared experiences with others. While popular opinion might suggest that the value of a commodity brand is merely constructed by superficial marketing strategies and advertising ploys, Foster argues that both

companies and consumers create "brand value" in cooperation. On the side of the consumer,

Foster (2007) argues that brands are produced "through the everyday practices in which

consumers use branded goods to create social relations and shared meanings and affect"

(716). Here Foster gives the example of a mother who only uses one type of laundry

detergent to wash her family's clothes because it is the one and only detergent that her own

mother used to wash laundry. This detergent brand has become an important part of her daily

routine, of her duties as a mother and wife and caregiver, and even as a daughter; in these

ways this brand has become an anchor in maintaining these very specific social bonds and

shared meanings in her family. Foster (2007) argues that these are "brands that are not simply

respected and trusted, but loved," and thus these brands, as *lovemarks* (to use an advertizing

term), "signal an emotional connection and attachment to a brand that goes beyond reason"

(708). That is to say consumers don't always purchase goods and services, or brands, based

upon any notion of logic or list of variables, such as value or utility. Some consumers, in fact,

purchase and/or use certain goods, services, and/or brands because of the strong emotional

bonds these items facilitate between themselves and others.

Applying History and Theory

History and theory surrounding the human treatment of death are as vast and multi-

dimensional as mortuary rituals themselves. Hence, the survey of death rites and funeral

practices, and the various theories regarding them, presented in this thesis is in no way

intended to be exhaustive or wholly conclusive. The comparisons and perspectives presented

here are meant to distinguish the particular ways in which death is treated within various

social and cultural systems over time and in space so that we may determine how death is—

or is not—treated differently within our own society and culture (see Metcalf and Huntington 1991).

One point to be drawn from these cultural comparisons and perspectives is that death often presents not only an occasion to celebrate the life of the deceased, but also a time of sociality and group maintenance for the living. In what way(s) do the funeral practices of this study maintain similar components of individuality and sociality? In comparison to other mortuary rituals, to what extent are familial bonds and values important in the funerals of this study? In consideration of these questions, to what extent should one suggest that these funerals really are only about individual distinction in times of death? In comparing mortuary rituals of American history to those of some cultures in West Africa, we find that the dynamic of such individuality and sociality is often negotiated through displays of social standing. To what extent is the display of social standing important to the people involved with the funeral practices of this study? Furthermore, we find that the display of material objects and images can also negotiate the relationship of individuality and sociality between the living and the dead. How do the objects and symbols—the commodities and brands—of these funerals facilitate a relationship of individuality and sociality by providing identity for the deceased and social context for the living?

In teasing out the particulars of the funeral practices researched in this present study, what stands out in relief are the use and incorporation of commodities, brands, and consumer preferences, but also their perceived relationship to the concepts of lifestyle and taste and the expression of distinction in times of death. With regards to existing literature and theory on these topics and concepts (Bourdieu 1984; Chaney 1996; Dunn 2008; Featherstone 1991; Slater 2008[1997]), another set of pertinent questions needs to be addressed. On behalf of the

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people involved, how do perceptions and expressions of lifestyle, taste, and distinction function within these commodity-branded and consumer-themed funeral practices? In what way(s) are commodities, brands, and consumer preferences used negotiate distinctions in times of death? To what extent are these distinctions a matter of creating and communicating difference between individuals, living or dead? In contrast, how might these distinctions indeed be about similarity, or even conformity? There is a fair amount of contention as to the level of class-consciousness in contemporary American consumer behavior. Therefore, there is, again, a need to question the importance of social position for the deceased and the people involved with these funerals. In doing so, it should be questioned how commodities, brands, and consumer preferences might play a role in any possible expression of social status and class standing. Lastly, given that some literature suggests that some consumer behavior is driven by affect and family ties, like that of some mortuary rituals, it is necessary to examine the extent to which these funerals might be about expressing affection and maintaining familial bonds and values.

CHAPTER 3

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

As sociological phenomena, very little is currently known about commodity branded and consumer themed funerals. No known qualitative or quantitative data has yet to be gathered in an attempt to analyze either the underlying meaning of these phenomena or the social significance of these very unique funeral products and practices. For instance, when I initially began this study with an attempt to gauge the overall "popularity" of branded and themed funeral products and practices, I found a pervasive lack of data and information. Of the manufacturers, distributors, and retailers that I was able to locate and contact during this study, all were either unable or unwilling to disclose any form of manufacturing, distribution, and/or sales information that might add perspective to the size and/or popularity of these funerals. Upon contacting the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) department of statistics, I was informed that no known qualitative or quantitative records describe the products, practices, or performances of branded funerals (to use my own term). According to the NFDA, these types of funerals would be cataloged under the broader category of "personalized funerals"; however, due to the fact that the American funeral industry has yet to clearly define the category of "personalized funerals," there are no known records depicting the personalized funeral category either.

Developing an Approach

During this research project I was able to locate only nineteen manufacturers, distributors, retailers, and funeral homes and directors known to be openly and legitimately

involved in the production and distribution of branded and themed funeral products and services. According to data actually collected by the NDFA department of statistics, in 2009 there were an estimated 25,820 funeral directors in the United States, 24,181 funeral homes recorded in 2011, and an undocumented number of funerary product manufacturers and distributors in the same year (see www.nfda.org; www.ibisworld.com). Referenced against these statistics it would appear that the small number of professionals I was able to locate in fact reveal branded funerals to be a marginal practice within the mainstream U.S. funeral industry. However, for a number of reasons cited above, it is currently impossible to gauge the degree of "representativeness" of branded funeral phenomena in the United States.

First of all, burial and cremation product manufacturing and distribution is an unregulated trade in the United States. Today, any carpenter can craft and decorate caskets, any mason can cut and etch stone grave markers, and any entrepreneur can become a wholesale or retail distributor of funerary products—all of which accounts for the undocumented number of funerary product manufacturers in this country. (A few of my own, later discussed, informants can in fact be categorized in this manner). Likewise, there is no accounting for the illegal use of copyrighted material—*i.e.*, consumer brands—in the production of memorial products and the performance of funerals. Thus, it is impossible to know how many product manufacturers produce and sell mortuary products that are adorned with illegally obtained and distributed copyrighted brands.

For similar reasons, ascertainment of how many businesses legally obtain and distribute branded funeral products and services in America today is impossible. However, commodity branded and consumer-themed funerals can be studied on a qualitative, case-by-case basis. For instance, a number of (anonymous) funeral industry professionals contacted in

this study willingly disclosed that they have discovered various methods of legally producing branded funeral products without obtaining copyright permission or paying copyright fees. Most often this is done in one of two ways. Either the business will discretely alter the branded image that is being used, so as to not actually replicate copyrighted material, or they will request that their customers legally purchase the branded image or commodity elsewhere and then provide it to the funerary company. In doing so the customer owns the rights to the image or commodity, and can then request that it be incorporated into the funeral in any way he or she chooses.

Lastly, it is not known how many independent consumers or funeral homes made a one-time-only purchase of a branded funeral product or service. Of the product manufacturers and distributors contacted during this study, some indicated that they often engage in one-time-only sales with funeral homes, cemeteries, and/or the general public. In these cases, where repeat business does not occur, sales information and client files are often neither recorded nor kept.

For these reasons, this study brackets questions of the size, scope, and overall popularity of branded funerals. Rather, the primary concern of this research is with the direct observation of social phenomena. To this end, the methodological aim of this research study is to interpret the shared meaning of a branded funeral as situated action, which is established by social agents within a world of signs and objects. By examining the personal experiences of agents, the intent of this study is to understand the relationship between consumer branding, the expression of lifestyle and taste, and the performance of the funeral among participants in a very small sample of branded and themed funerals.

Research Informants

During the spring of 2012, I conducted nine interviews with individuals intimately experienced with these newly developing branded funeral trends. As "research informants," these individuals are divided into two categories: "(American) funeral industry professionals," individuals involved in the manufacturing, distribution, and/or retail sale of branded funeral products or services; and the "significant others" of the deceased, primarily family members of persons for whom a branded funeral was purchased and/or performed.

As previously mentioned, I was able to locate and contact nineteen funeral industry professionals (businesses and individuals) openly associated with branded funeral products, practices, and/or services. This search was conducted by means of mass media research—provided by newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, company websites, and Internet "cold searches"—as well as by referrals from other research contacts and informants. Of these nineteen total professionals, eleven may be described as product manufacturers or distributors, whereas eight may be described as product retailers or funeral service providers (*i.e.*, individual funeral directors). In the end, while eight professional informants were willingly interviewed, six interviews were ultimately used in the data collection and analysis of this study. Importantly, all professional informants contacted for this study represent businesses and/or individuals that have publicly disclosed "regular" production, distribution, and/or sales of legally branded memorial products and services, as well as report to have intimate knowledge of their customers' personal experiences and desires. Interviews were conducted via telephone conversations as well as in person. With each in-person interview I was also given permission to conduct on-site field observations of the various informants' manufacturing facilities, funeral homes, and/or retail stores.

In regards to significant other informants, I was afforded the opportunity to speak directly with the family members of two individuals who were memorialized by their unique life-style choices as well as their allegiance to certain name-brand commodities. Due to ethical restrictions I was unable to directly solicit participation from significant other informants, as I would be unable to know whether or not these persons were amidst a period of bereavement. Therefore, all contact made between myself—the researcher—and any significant other informant was facilitated through a willing third party, which often consisted of professional informants and contacts, professional colleagues, and personal acquaintances. Once contacted and informed of this study by a third party, all willing significant other informants were then directed to contact the researcher for potential participation in this research study. While this sampling method provided contact with a number of potential informants, in the end I was able to yield two telephone interviews with the immediate family of two deceased men. As a result, secondary-sourced testimony of two significant others, which was garnered from publicly distributed interviews found in print and Internet media resources, have been included so as to widen the sample of non-funeral industry professional informants.

In the following "Findings and Analysis" chapter, all informant testimony and field observations, along with all secondary-sourced testimony, are presented together as a series of narratives. Lived experiences and personal anecdotes gained from in-person and telephone interviews are presented in the same context as field site descriptions and personal accounts and any testimony garnered from mass media resources. Each case is meant to highlight the personal experiences of individuals while emphasizing each informant's unique vantage point, either as a funeral industry insider or as a funeral participant and/or first hand observer.

These interviews are intended to explore and analyze only a cross-section of commodity-branded and consumer-themed funeral products, practices, and experiences rather than attempt to present a holistic generalization of "a branded funeral phenomenon." Each informant of this study gave consent to use his or her actual name and personal information within this written paper; however, only "professional informants'" names and information is revealed within this paper. All "significant other informants" and any deceased persons mentioned in this study have been given pseudonyms. Categorization and coding of all informant testimony occurred during the process of data collection and is based upon informants' implicit and explicit reference to self-identity, self-expression, taste, lifestyle choices, brand/commodity preferences and loyalties, and any manner in which these categories relate to various social relationships and group identifications.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Professionals

The following narratives describe the experiences and testimony of funeral industry

professionals (businesses or individuals) privileged with a unique insight into the meanings

and motivations of branded funeral products, services, and/or products. All professional

informants were asked to provide background information about their business and to

describe their professional involvement with branded (as well as generally "personalized")

funeral products, services, and/or products, and, if possible, to share any detailed information

about their clients' and customers' personal background, motivations, and/or experiences.

While all professional informant interviews were conversational, each informant was asked a

series of semi-structured questions intended to gain background information and compose a

model of his or her business.

From the World's Finest Brands

Established in 2003, Michigan-based Eternal Image, Inc. is the self-proclaimed

pioneer of "brand-name memorial products." Since first appearing on the market in 2006, the

company's product line has grown to include burial and cremation caskets, cremation urns,

and grave marker engravings[3] that display recognizable consumer brands and logos such as

Star Trek, the band KISS, Precious Moments, and every team in Major League Baseball (to

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[3] According to eternalimage.net, customers may purchase an "engraving certificate," which is to be taken to the
funeral home, cemetery, stonecutter, or monument builder of his/her choice and thereby grants the permission
for a one-time engraving of an officially licensed brand name. The website indicates that these certificates must
be used within six months of purchase.

name only a few) (see figure 5). Although one of the most well known manufacturers and distributors of funerary products in the United States, Eternal Image, Inc. CEO and Founder, Clint Mytych, confesses that he has always been an outsider to the mortuary business and the American funeral industry. In fact, when I spoke with Mytych he explained that he developed the idea for the company's unique product line only after he began to consider his own mortality and eventual demise.

Several years ago Mytych began searching for an internment vessel in the likeness of a 1967 Ford Mustang. As a self-described car enthusiast, Mytych wanted to ensure that his life-long appreciation for antique automobiles, and specifically his taste for the classic Ford Mustang, would be appropriately represented at his own funeral (interview with Clint Mytych). Yet, much to his dismay, Mytych's search produced negative results. A brand-conscious consumer himself, Mytych realized that branded goods have proven successful in most other markets, and he therefore had little doubt that they would be successful with memorial products as well. Mytych suggests that most people, like himself, have a personal attachment to a particular brand(s) that, as he says, "brings them joy or fulfillment" in everyday life (interview with Clint Mytch). Believing that "people would want the same identification with brand names in memorial products" as in everyday life, Mytych was given the inspiration to create Eternal Image, Inc. (interview with Clint Mytych). Now a successful memorial products manufacturer, Mytych claims that Eternal Image's goal is to "celebrate the passions of life"; in doing so he notes, "We take brand names that people identified with in life, their passions and hobbies, and make those trademark designs an essence available in memorial products" (Alexander 2011:1).

Figure 5. Featured Products on the Eternal Image, Inc. Website, eternalimage.net
(www.eternalimage.net, Retrieved Feburary, 2011).

Informed by his own brand attachment, Mytych finds that brands provide individuals

personal pleasure and satisfaction, which, Mytych suggests, they then use as a means of

narrating how they choose to live their lives—in life as in death. His sentiments echo those of

some scholars who suggest that consumers will often form personal attachments and

developed tastes and intimate relationships with specific brands because of the way those

brands make them feel about themselves and their place within the world (Foster 2007; Gobé

2001; Holt 2004; Klein 2010). While this gives credence to Mytych's argument that

consumers who identify with certain brands or commodities in life would want the same

identification in death, it sheds little light on the intrinsically social aspect of the funeral

practices—and, for that matter, brand consumption. Given that funerals are often purchased

and arranged by the family and friends of the deceased, I ask Mytych to discuss why he

believes that others would want name-brand funeral products for their loved ones. To this

question, Mytych replies that:

In our day-in-age branding is everywhere. So maybe it's that Americans, in general, are more comfortable—talking in relation to funeral services—having a brand name there…something there that is more of a testimony to the way someone lived or to what their passion was or what their hobbies were. (Interview with Clint Mytych.)

While Mytych continues to maintain that identification with a brand is indeed a personal matter, he does note, however, a very important social component to such brand identification. Just as Bourdieu (1984) argues that tastes "classify the classifier" as they are necessarily perceived by others in a social world, Mytych suggests that brands play an important role in not only individuals' self-identification but also in the way that they are identified by others. In this way identification with a brand or preferred commodity becomes a signifier in how an individual wishes to be seen by others (Holt 2004; Klein 2010). Importantly, however, Mytych continues to further imply that the banality of commodity brands offer not only a familiar comfort for grieving families, but also a way of maintaining a relationship between the living and the dead. Indeed, this speaks to Miller's (1998) notion that some consumers feel a distinct sense of responsibility in making sure that they purchase what they believe their significant others need in order to maintain a "proper" social existence—perhaps even in death.

As I further questioned Mytych about the "comforting" notion of branded funeral products, he admitted that his limited interaction with consumers prevented him from knowing much about the personal sentiments of those who have actually purchased his company's products (interview with Clint Mytych). Eternal Image, Inc. rarely sells its products direct to consumers, but rather distributes its products to various funeral homes and mortuaries that do provide a retail experience. Therefore I contacted Eternal Image product retailer and New Jersey funeral director, Dennis McGee. McGee's personal interaction with consumers and his history as a funeral director have provided him with invaluable insight

into the changing values of funeral consumers and the evolution of funeral practices. As we

talked, McGee described for me that in funeral practices of the past the deceased's affiliation

with local fraternal organizations or church groups was usually used to negotiate

relationships between the bereaved and the dead (interview with Dennis McGee). He argues

that people today, however, are less apt to maintain familiar bonds and social relationships

via such traditional affiliations. Rather, McGee believes that things like popular brands have

now come to facilitate these relationships in times of death:

> We're so spread out that, you know, larger brands that reach coast to coast are, I
> think, much more easily identifiable. So no matter where you are, when you come in
> [to our funeral home] with a family member it's something that you can share in…as
> opposed to the more traditional stuff. …Things like logos and emblems are easily
> identifiable, and they're easy to attach yourself to. … A lot of times it's even easier
> for the person going through the event of death—for the families it becomes easily
> identifiable too. I know that if I see a [Philadelphia] Phillies logo, I know that my dad
> loved that team. And because he loved that team, I have fond memories of sitting on
> the couch and watching a game with my dad. So, the brands too are part of that
> experience. (Interview with Dennis McGee.)

Here, McGee touches on a number of important issues, but immediately relevant is

his suggestion that commodity brands provide a mechanism by which people create and

maintain social bonds. As such, Bourdieu (1984) would explain that such bonds are formed

through shared aesthetic dispositions and socio-cultural backgrounds, which, as other

theorists would add, results in a social network of individuals with shared brand loyalties (see

Holt 2004). Yet, at the same time, much in that way that McGee makes specific reference to

familiar ties, it is important to note that commodity brands can function as facilitators of

shared meaning, love, and affect as well (see Dunn 1998; Foster 2007; Miller 1998).

Be Remembered As You Lived

Similar to Eternal Image, Kansas-based 'Til We Meet Again (TWMA) manufactures and sells assorted styles of caskets, urns, and grave markers that depict various commodity brands and themes, including Major League Baseball, Star Trek, Harley Davidson, and KISS. Like Mytych, TWMA Founder and President, Nathan Smith, was an outsider to the funeral industry who felt that there was a potential market for branded and otherwise personalized funeral products. Rather than manufacture from a warehouse and distribute to second-party retailers, TWMA operates as an in-house customization shop and retail storefront in the Towne West Square shopping mall in Wichita, Kansas (see figure 6). Given the opportunity to visit TWMA, I met with the store's office manager, Angela Garrett. As we walk through the store and browse their product catalogues, Garrett points out several items that were designed to match past customers' individualized orders. The store's showroom floor is littered with caskets shaped like racecars or decorated like grand pianos, and urns shaped like Harley Davidson motorcycle gas tanks or adorned with sport team logos. Garrett points to a catalogued photograph of a cigar box-shaped, wooded urn that is mounted with figurines of each character from the animated Disney movie, Toy Story (see figure 7); she tells me it is an urn designed by special request for the family of a young boy who loved nothing more than Toy Story (interview with Angela Garrett). Garrett then directs my attention to a display of what looks like an over-sized novelty fishing rod and reel (see figure 8). She tells me that it is a cremation urn as well, and explains that a man who went fishing with his father every weekend commissioned the urn for his father upon his death (interview with Angela Garrett). The man had TWMA design an urn that would allow him to continue taking his father fishing with him every weekend. What makes the urn distinct, Garrett notes, is that it is an

exact replica (although not built to scale) of the father's fishing rod and reel (interview with

Angela Garrett).

Garrett is quick to explain that the boy's family and the fisherman's son both intended

to create urns that celebrated their loved ones' distinctive personalities and individual tastes.

As Garrett explains (in a way that might agree with some of Mytych's viewpoints), the boy

developed an attachment to the Toy Story franchise because it brought him joy and

fulfillment in his short life, and thus his family commissioned the urn so that they could

always remember him by his love of Toy Story. The fisherman's son requested that his

father's urn be an exact replica of his rod and reel namely because he was known for using

that particular model and brand of rod and reel. The claim here is that his rod and reel was

part of what made him a distinct person. Yet, in attempting to express their loved ones'

distinctive personalities and individual tastes, Garrett implies that the families of the boy and

the fisherman further developed their own identification with these commodities and brands.

Thus, it seems that these commodities and brands have become not only the means by which

these families remember the distinctive traits of their loved ones, but also the a way in which

these family members have chosen to relate to their deceased loved ones (see Foster 2007).

To this, it could be argued that such commodities and brands have exercised the ability to

represent a valuable identity marker for not just the deceased but the family as well (Dunn

1998; Holt 2004). Such is the case in Asante funerals, wherein the inwardly perceived and

outwardly expressed group identity of the family is inexplicably linked to that of the

deceased (Bonsu and Belk 2003; de Witte 2003).

I found it curious that although the fisherman's urn was designed to celebrate the

uniqueness of *his* life, a replica of his original rod and reel urn is indeed for sale to anyone

Figure 6. 'Til We Meet Again Storefront, Towne West Square Shopping Mall, Wichita, Kansas. Photo by Nathan R Driskill.
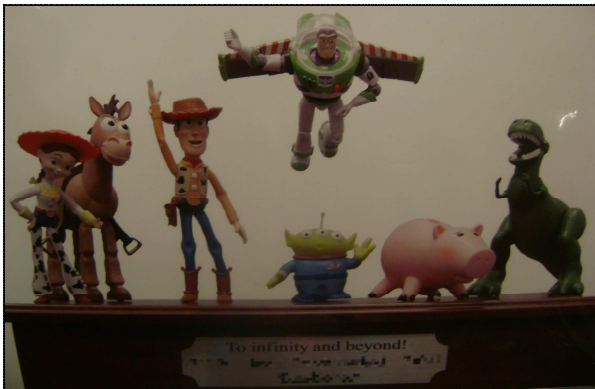

Figure 7. Toy Story Urn.
Photo by Nathan R Driskill

Figure 8. Rod and Reel Urn.
Photo by Nathan R Driskill.

who might want to be interred in a fishing pole. I inquired as why this is the case, and Garrett explained that CEO Smith will often recreate special request product designs, such as the rod and reel urn, so they may be sold to others who share in similar interests or hobbies (interview with Angela Garrett). Once reproduced for retail, Garrett notes that many of these once one-of-a-kind memorial products quickly become favorites amongst walk-in customers of similar interests:

> When their loved one does pass they're like, 'Oh, I saw something in that [store] that would fit them perfectly.' [Or,] 'Oh my gosh Billy would love that casket!...Well, if Billy passes, then I've found the perfect casket for him!' (Interview with Angela Garrett.)

Interestingly, although these designs are understandably reproduced so as to market to other consumers of similar interests, tastes, hobbies, and/or lifestyles, as a result, such a process renders these pieces no longer one-of-a-kind. Here Bourdieu (1984) might suggest that such a form of shared tastes, lifestyle, and consumer practice is that which forges a unity between individuals of a shared habitus, aesthetic disposition, and thus class position (77). Likewise, other theorists might add that appropriation of certain material goods is indeed a telling sign of social belonging—hence, only certain demographic of avid fisherman, "like us," would be interred in such an urn (Dunn 1998; McCraken 1988). At the same time, however, both Bourdieu and other would likely agree that such an attempt to differentiate oneself amongst a group of like-minded-others also creates a means of discriminating against any that doesn't fit the profile of someone who would be interred in this way (ibid.).

A Living Personal Expression

Caskets and urns, however, are not the only means by which families and individuals may distinguish themselves or express their consumer preferences. Beyond traditional casket

Figure 9. Mickey Mouse Flower
Arrangement. Courtesy of Phillips'
Flowers, Chicago, Illinois.

Figure 10. University of Notre Dame Mascot
Flower Arrangement. Courtesy of Phillips'
Flowers, Chicago, Illinois.

sprays and funeral wreaths, Phillip's Flowers and Gifts of Chicago, Illinois, specializes in

"personalized funeral flowers" that can be hand-crafted in the likeness of anything from

sports team logos to Mickey Mouse's face or a Harley Davidson motorcycle (see figure 9 and

Figure 10). When I spoke with Jim Van Ewyk, assistant manger of Phillip's sympathy

department and design center, he described for me the process of designing a personalized

arrangement. Van Ewyk explained that there are two common ways in which the floral

design is chosen. More often than not, arrangements will begin with an original design

request. The deceased's family, friends, or business associates will bring a logo or a image to

the design center, something Van Ewyk describes as a reflection of the deceased's "favorite

thing" or "favorite hobby," an image to which the person "related" (interview with Jim Van

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Ewyk). The arrangement is then built from scratch based upon the customer's specifications. As we talk, I ask Van Ewyk why he believes Phillip's customers first began requesting personalized and branded floral arrangements and why he thinks they're popular amongst consumers today. He remarks that, "…They want to be different; they want their piece to be different and to stand out…You'll always have that person that wants to have something different, and is willing to pay for it" (interview with Jim Van Ewyk).

Yet Van Ewyk indicates that in the case of an original design request, the arrangement is always photographed and then placed in a design catalogue with hundreds of other personalized flower arrangements (interview with Jim Van Ewyk). Thus, the selection of a previously designed arrangement accounts for the other method in which a floral design was chosen. Here customers are encouraged to browse the photographs until finding a design that best represents the interest or hobby of their friend or loved one. Here, Van Ewyk recalls one instance where a special request floral arrangement soon became a common and popular design:

> …Not too long ago now…the owner of the Blackhawks [professional hockey team] died. The organization ordered a giant Blackhawks emblem. And that was taken downtown and placed in front of the stadium and then taken to his office. We did get quite a few orders from that, from people that had seen that. …It catches your eye. They'll say, "We were at a wake six months ago and there was that beautiful Indian head that you made and we'd like to have one made for our friend." (Interview with Jim Van Ewyk.)

In many ways Van Ewyk seemed to be stating the obvious when describing his personalized floral arrangements. He explained that they are intended to reflect something specific to the deceased, as a means of offering his clients and customers what they desire: a way to be "different and to stand out" (interview with Jim Van Ewyk). As such, it could it could be said that his consumers—like others who desire brand specific materials and

possessions—are simply attempting establish an "identifiable social slot within an anonymous mass" of other consumers (Dunn 2008). In doing so, it could be further argued that they are embracing the "identity value" of their chosen brand, in an attempt to communicate how they think about themselves and how they think about their position within the world (Bauman 2007; Holt 2004; Klein 2010). Of course, in the event that the floral arrangement is purchased by another, then it the deceased's significant other that is attempting the make these decisions on his or her behalf.

Yet, as we talked I found it increasingly interesting that although Van Ewyk thoroughly described his floral arrangements as wholly unique and personal, he then proceeded to explain to me the various ways in which many customer designs are based off of previous designs found in the shop catalogue or witnessed first-hand at a pubic funeral. This reminded me of my visit to 'Til We Meet Again and the case of the fisherman's rod and reel urn. In these instances, Bourdieu might again suggest that the consumers who chose to purchase such reproduce goods for themselves or their loved ones are doing so because of shared tastes that reflect a similar habitus and aesthetic disposition. Yet, it might also be said that some actually chose to use these already designed arrangements specifically because they were previously displayed others. As Bauman (2007) has suggested, within a society of consumers social bonds tend to be mediated by markets for consumer products wherein the process of self-identification is pursued, and subsequently displayed, through "visible 'marks of belonging'" (82-83). With the case of the Blackhawks floral arrangement perhaps it was so greatly desired by other consumers because it was first designed for the former owner of the team; and thus those who subsequently chose the design did so to show their perceived connection to the team, its fans, and its owner.

As Unique as Your Loved One

While personalized and branded products provide one avenue for the expression of individuality and lifestyle, some have found the actual performance of the conventional funeral to be limited. As such, some funeral professionals have taken it upon themselves to re-invent the performance of the funeral in a way that is befitting the lifestyle and tastes of the deceased. This is the case with Aaron Grimes, funeral director at Wade Funeral Home in Saint Louis, Missouri.

During the nineteen-eighties and nineties, Grimes began to see that many of his customers no longer desired what he refers to as "cookie-cutter funeral services," funerals that followed a standardized blueprint and lacked a "personalized touch" (interview with Aaron Grimes). As a consequence, Grimes for years went to great lengths to design uniquely personalized funerals for his customers. In many cases he would request that his customers supply him and his staff with personal possessions and intimate stories of the deceased that could be incorporated in the funeral. However, Grimes felt that there had to be a more effective way to thoroughly celebrate an individual's preferred lifestyle and interests. While attending a Batesville Casket Company product demonstration in late 1999, Grimes noticed that the Batesville Company had constructed a series of backdrops behind various display caskets. Although these relatively cinematic backdrops, dubbed "vignettes," were designed as product displays, Grimes decided to incorporate these vignettes into the funeral service itself. He decided that the most appropriate way to celebrate the lifestyle or interest of a deceased individual was to cinematically recreate some aspect of his or her lifestyle during his or her funeral. Thus Grimes has installed three large vignettes inside the Wade Funeral Home, these being "big mama's kitchen," the "sportsman's television room," and "the

traditional parlor" (see figure 11). Customers are give the option—at no additional cost—to

select for their funeral the vignette that best represents their own lifestyle or the lifestyle of

their significant other. However, knowing that these set vignettes might not appeal to all

customers, Grimes continues to request that his customers supply him with personal

possessions and intimate stories that can be used to create a customized vignette.

While touring the Wade Funeral Home with Mr. Grimes, he explained to me that over the

past decade he has had to fulfill some very unique requests, such as having to transform the

funeral home's chapel into a temporary bowling alley, a fisherman's pond (filled with live

fish), a backyard bar-b-que, and a casino. While these vignettes, Grimes notes, are obviously

intended to celebrate an individual's hobby or interests, he admits that customers often

request to incorporate a company affiliation or specific brand or consumer product into the

vignette. He remarks that, "People want certain types of things, because that's what they're

known for…like in my case it would be Pepsi" (interview with Aaron Grimes). He goes on to

say:

> We will create anything. There was a gentleman that worked for Greyhound Bus, he
> was a porter, so we called up Greyhound…and we got an old wooden dolly…and we
> put some luggage on it, and put it at the head of the casket. They also gave us a toy
> Greyhound bus and we put it up there too. …But that's what you do—you
> personalize it…to celebrate someone's life with their loved ones. (Interview with
> Aaron Grimes.)

Although Grimes is extremely innovative and seems to be very much in touch with

his consumer base and his clients' needs and desires, Mr. Grimes often continues to observe

things like a "traditional" American funeral director. He understands that personalization is

the growing trend within his industry, and he has obviously taken great strides to play a large

role in this trend. However, Grimes's keen sense for the role of the funeral has allowed him

to understand that while most funerals might present an individualized focus in the

Figure 11. Themed Funeral Vignette ("Big Mama's Kitchen"), Wade Funeral Home, St. Louis, Missouri. Photo by Aaron Grimes.

foreground, what lies behind the veil of personalization is a ritual orchestrated for the benefit of the bereaved. As we continue to talk, Grimes regularly mentions that although these thematic funeral services are initially designed to express the unique lifestyle of the individual, they are often transformed into large family-oriented celebrations (interview with Aaron Grimes). He mentions that, more often than not, the families of the deceased feel compelled to interact with the deceased via the funeral vignette (interview with Aaron Grimes). Grimes recalls one particular instance that involved the "big mama's kitchen" vignette:

> …We had a lady where they always went to her mother's house every weekend, and her mother would fry chicken…and they would play cards. …So I went and got some fried chicken and…during the visitation her mother was laying there in the casket and they were right there at the table playing cards. (Interview with Aaron Grimes.)

Grimes then elaborates in saying that the ultimate goal of these vignettes is to create a "special mood" for the family and friends of the deceased; he remarks that, "We just want to

see the wow on the families faces….to get satisfaction for the families" (interview with Aaron Grimes).

Grimes and the Wade Funeral Home will oblige any customer request. In the past they've designed thematic funeral vignettes that have incorporated a number of their clients preferred commodities, brands, and consumer themes. During our talk Grimes was hard pressed to remember most of them, as there have been so many over the years. Like others in his field, Grimes has no doubt that the best way to express the deceased's former personal lifestyle and tastes is by way of his or her favorite brand of soft drink or automobile or sports teams or whatever else. Likewise, he is quick to agree that these tastes are what make each of us distinct individuals. He understands that people sometimes latch onto certain brands and commodities, for whatever reason, and subsequently others begin to identify them by these objects or images (see Bauman 2007; Holt 2004; Klein 2010). Yet, Grimes also understands that the representation of the individual, the deceased, reflects only one part of the funeral ritual; the other part is the social—the deceased's family, friends, and community. In this way, according to Grimes, not much is different from more traditional funerals of the past, present, and in other cultures; death is still very much a public event even in the most personalized of funerals.

One-of-a-Kind Memorials

Headquartered out of an old Phillips 66 filing station on the edge of a small and rural eastern Kansas town is the Eagle Memorials grave marker production shop and retail store. The shop specializes in what owner and operator Bill Jones calls "one-of-a-kind memorials": upright and flush mount granite grave markers and burial monuments that are custom

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sandblasted with nearly any possible choice of "personalized" images—as evidenced by the sample stones that scatter the store's lobby and parking lot (interview with Bill Jones). The stones on display at Jones's shop are of all shapes and sizes, and many have been sandblasted and painted to display sports teams logos, Looney Tunes cartoon characters, images of green John Deere tractors, and even Chevy truck emblems.

Similar to Mytych and Smith, Jones was once an outsider to the funeral industry who noticed a newly developing market for a unique product. Despite being a small town guy, who constantly refers to his self as an "old redneck" (a refrain that is always followed with a quiet chuckle and a sly grin), Jones will be the first one to admit that American culture today is one of consumerism and rugged individualism. As we talk, Jones is constantly referencing the influential power of money, and that his customers are willing to pay whatever it takes to ensure their grave markers are as distinct as can be:

> The world is changing so fast that everybody is striving for something different… Everybody that comes through [my] door wants something different than [what] "Bob and Betty's" got the next spot over from them in the cemetery. (Interview with Bill Jones.)

Whenever I ask Jones why his own customers have such a strong desire to be different, he always notes that he never asks: "It's not my job to ask why," he says, "It's just my job to do it" (interview with Bill Jones). Yet, on several occasions Jones does note that many of personalized stones has created over the years have indeed been more of a reflection of some of his customers' personal background, rather than just their consumer preferences. In one instance, Jones tells me of a couple that came to him for customized grave markers:

He's a mechanic…on big trucks—semis, dump trucks, and stuff like that. And his wife just recently passed and her dad was a racecar driver. He said, "Her dad used to drive 'jalopies,' and his number was 68. So, on her side I want an old jalopy racecar and 68 on it. On my side I want a dump truck, because that's what I've done all of my life." And when you go and read that stone…it says that she liked racecars, and then you read his side of it and it says that he liked dump trucks. (Interview with Bill Jones.)

As we talk, Jones notes several grave markers he has created from requests similar to this one—that is, customers who desire personalized designs that reflect "where they came from," and the ways in which their background echoed in who they were as a person. Here, it is easy to suggest that the symbolism in the headstone of the truck mechanic and his wife goes beyond that of personalization in a reflection of their cultural dispositions and tastes. In Bourdieu's (1984) schema, one's taste, revealed in his or her aspirations and preferences, is predisposed to the economic, cultural, and social conditions in which that person was raised and educated. What has surfaced here are not necessarily matters of individuality, but rather an embodiment of the social world from which he or she originated and presently resides. Yet, as the grave marker of the truck mechanic and his wife reveals, we as individuals are often identified and distinguished by our own outward expression of our predisposed dispositions.

Like Van Ewyk, Jones is also often asked to replicate previously design headstones. Jones too catalogues all of his past designs, and even has a computer program that houses hundreds of other images—all available for his customers' choosing. Yet, Jones explains that once he has created a custom-designed marker for a family, other members of the family will often come to him and request that their own pre-arranged markers will display the same image, artwork, or logo (interview with Bill Jones). What is more, Jones admits that from time to time he has even been contracted to replicate an existing marker in a local cemetery,

one that he did not originally design and construct (interview with Bill Jones). In these

situations Jones will request that the customer bring him a photo or a grave rubbing, so that

he may replicate the image exactly. Here it would seem that many of his customer seek

customized, themed, branded, or otherwise "personalized" grave markers as a means of

connecting with others have already died. In this way, Foster (2007) points out that some

consumers gravitate toward certain goods, services, and/or symbols if only because of the

strong emotional bonds these items facilitate between themselves and family members. When

I ask Jones why he thinks his customers would chose to design grave markers that mirror

those of their deceased friends and family members, again he tells me that, "It's not my job

to ask why, it's just my job to do it" (interview with Bill Jones). He notes that all that is

important to him is that his products and services provide his customers with the appropriate

closure.

As Jones and I walk around the outside of his shop we survey the dozens of actual

grave markers (some samples, some custom orders pending payment) that surround the

parking lot (see figure 12). While out front, I ask Jones if he would comment on a particular

monument he has on display—an upright headstone carved and etched in the shape of the

storybook steam locomotive, Thomas the Tank Engine (see figure 13). At first Jones is

reluctant to discuss the grave marker. Eventually he explains that it was an early design for a

Kansas City man who commissioned the marker for his recently deceased son. I inquire as to

why the man chose the image of Thomas, as opposed to the designs of Disney and Looney

Tunes characters that Jones has in his catalogues. Jones explains to me that the man and his

son spent a lot of time playing together with a Thomas the Tank Engine train set, and because

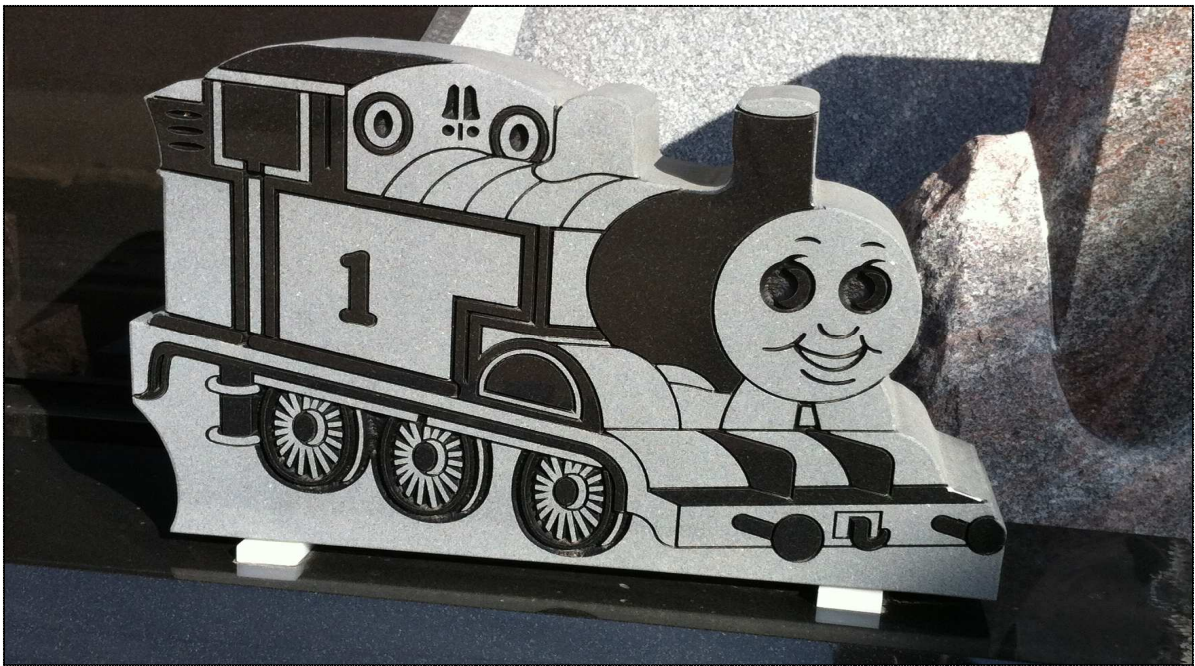Figure 12. Eagle Memorials, Tonganoxie, Kansas. Photo by Nathan R Driskill.

Figure 13. Thomas the Tank Engine Headstone. Photo by Nathan R Driskill.

Thomas was something "they shared together" he wanted to make sure that their shared interest and his son's love of Thomas was represented in his grave marker (interview with Bill Jones). In many ways this marker bears a striking resemblance to the child's Toy Story urn designed by 'Til We Meet Again. In both instances the child's personal liking for a recognizable consumer image is used to express his personality as well as memorialize his relationship with his family.

Significant Others

In the narratives that follow a select number of significant other informants discuss their now deceased family members and the funerals that were intended to celebrate their lives. Each interview was almost entirely conversational and gave equal weight to discussions of the deceased's personal life and background as well as his funeral and the meaning and motivation behind its design. Lastly, I have included a couple of secondary-sourced narratives garnered from newspapers and memorial websites. Keeping with primary-sourced significant other testimony, all information of the below-cited secondary-sourced narratives was provided by family members of deceased persons and thus reveals privileged insight into the meanings and motivations of a few specific branded funerals.

The Ford Man

As Leann recalls, it is difficult to think of her father, Mark, as anything other than a "Ford Man" (interview with Leann Brumley). She describes her father's passion for Ford brand automobiles as "a part of who he was in life" (interview with Leann Brumley). A mechanic for many years, Mark disliked working on automobiles that were not Ford made,

nor would he own or even drive a car made by any company other than Ford. Ford was an embodiment of his lifestyle, but also a reflection of his upbringing and familiar ties. She suspects that her father came from a family of Ford loyalists—which, in her mind, explains why her father proudly instilled a love of Ford within his own children (interview with Leann Brumley). And, as Leann also describes, Ford continued to be a part of Mark even in death. As Mark grew sick and closer to death, he insisted that his final days and his funeral be a reflection of his loyalty and love for Ford brand automobiles. So when I spoke with Leann about her father and his funeral, I asked her to describe for me the days following her father's death and their family's attempt to carry out Mark's final wishes.

Leann first tells me how Mark requested that his body not, at any time after his death, be transported in any type of vehicle other than a Ford. Specifically, Mark had indicated to his other daughter that he did not wish to be transported by a Chevy brand automobile of any kind, because, as Leann notes, "he was *always* a 'Ford man'" (interview with Leann Brumley). With this request Mark made a conscious effort to maintain his distinction as a man of Ford brand automobiles—not only to express his personal disposition for Ford, but also to differentiate himself from those who prefer the "rival" Chevy brand. As a family of Ford loyalists, Mark's relatives undoubtedly understood the sincerity of his final wish. So when the mortuary staff arrived to retrieve Mark's remains in a Chevy minivan his family refused. Leann recalls that in that moment Mark's family banded together so as to ensure that her father's final wish would not be ignored (interview with Leann Brumley). They did so by transporting Mark's remains to the funeral home in the back of his son's own Ford mini-van. Their father and their family's loyalty to Ford became a medium through which Mark's

family was able to express their unwavering love, devotion, and respect for Mark (see Bauman 2007; Foster 2007; Holt 1997; Miller 1998).

Before his death Mark made a second request—slightly more complicated than the first, but no less sincere. As nothing more than a literal reflection of his dying devotion to Ford, Leann tells me that her father wanted his remains to be transported in the bed of his brand new Ford pick-up truck during his funeral procession (interview with Leann Brumley). This was a difficult task, one that required extensive planning and endless teamwork. Yet, as Leann explains, her family once again banded together so as to devise a way to position his casket in the bed of the truck (interview with Leann Brumley). As before, Mark's Ford truck became a means through which his family could express their love and devotion for Mark (see Holt 1997; Bauman 2007). In this case, however, Mark's friends became a part of this shared experience; Leann describes that being able to transport Mark to his gravesite in his own Ford truck allowed Mark's best friends the opportunity to ride with him in his the truck and give him the final farewell that he wanted and deserved (interview with Leann Brumley).

The Mopar Guy

Not unlike Mark, Greg was an automotive brand loyalist in life and in death; however, as his family describes him, Greg was a "Mopar Guy" (interview with Judy and Jim Johanson). Greg had been a "Mopar"[4] brand car enthusiast his entire life. According to Greg's sister and brother-in-law, Judy and Jim, Greg came from an entire family—in fact, several generations—of Mopar loyalists (interview with Judy and Jim Johanson). At an early age Greg quickly became a self-taught Mopar mechanic, a Mopar race car driver, and an avid

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[4] Mopar (abbreviation for Motor Parts) refers to the automobile parts and service portion of Chrysler Group LLC. Among car enthusiasts the term is used to broadly reference the Chrysler parent company and thus the Chrysler company brand and any Chrysler-built vehicle—often including Dodge, Chrysler, and Plymouth.

collector of antique Chrysler, Plymouth, and Dodge (*i.e.*, Mopar) automobiles. As Greg's

brother-in-law recalls, "In fact, [Greg] never had a car title issued to him that wasn't a

Chrysler product. Everything was Mopar, there was no in-between…even if he rented a car it

had to be a Mopar" (interview with Judy and Jim Johanson). Indeed, there was not a single

part of Greg's lifestyle that did not embody the Mopar brand. Like Mark, Greg's loyalty to

the Mopar brand was not only a reflection of how he was raised and with whom he

associated, it was also a means by which he distinguished himself from others (see Bourdieu

1984). In fact, Mopar was such a huge part of Greg's lifestyle that by the end of his life he

had assembled a collection of antique Mopar brand cars twenty strong. So when Greg died

suddenly, his family felt it was only right that his beloved Mopar cars would be utilized in a

"tribute" to the way Greg lived his life (interview with Judy and Jim Johanson).

     As Jim and Judy talked with me about Greg's funeral, they explained that Greg's son

came up with the idea to include his father's Mopar car collection in Greg's funeral service

(interview with Judy and Jim Johanson). On the day of the funeral, Greg's family and friends

brought several of his beloved Mopar cars, as well as several of their own Mopar cars, to the

church where Greg's service was to be held. Likewise, members from Greg's three car clubs

traveled from surrounding states, dressed in their various car club uniforms, and contributed

their own Mopar cars to the funeral. Thirty, or more, Mopar cars were on display along the

front drive of the church during Greg's funeral service, all of which were later driven by

Greg's family and friends during the procession to Greg's burial site. Jim described that

Greg's funeral was "like a car show," but took care to note that "it wasn't gaudy, it was just

'Greg'" (interview with Judy and Jim Johanson). To this Judy added, "It was part of the

tribute to him…we all felt like it's what people would expect, because everybody knew that cars were his life" (interview with Judy and Jim Johanson).

Here, the goal for Greg's friends and family was to celebrate his unique and distinct life as an all-consuming Mopar brand enthusiast. In doing so, however, they were not only recognizing Greg's personal taste for Mopar cars or his lifestyle as Mopar loyalist, they were recognizing his strong family ties with the Mopar brand as well as his place within a community of Mopar collectors and loyalists. In this way, certain brands may become associated with particular lifestyles; as such, they can then become totems for "social collectives" and "insignias of membership in a lifestyle or group" (Chaney 1996:106; Dunn 2008:181). Every year since Greg's death, his family and friends continue to celebrate Greg's lifestyle and community ties in a similar way. Each summer Greg's hometown Mopar car club gathers together for a regional Mopar car show. In describing the car show, Jim tells me how all of the club members wear memorial T-shirts that pay tribute to Greg, while honoring the best car and driver of the year with a memorial trophy in Greg's name (interview with Judy and Jim Johanson). Judy adds that this honor is "not just about their car," rather, as she explains, "it's about how they present themselves and how they live their life" (interview with Judy and Jim Johanson).

True Fans

In a recent newspaper interview, Steve Shaw discusses the sudden death of his adult son, Chase Shaw, and the funeral that celebrated his love of St. Louis Cardinals baseball. In the interview Shaw mentions that his son's loyalty to the Cardinals was unwavering, even when the team was losing and especially when Shaw's own loyalty began to wane. Shaw

recalls how his son would insist that, despite his aggravation at the team's poor performance, his father should stay by his side as they watched televised games together. Thus they should express their unconditional loyalty to the Cardinals. For these reasons, Shaw decided to incorporate his son's loyalty and love of Cardinals baseball into his funeral and burial.

> As soon as the tragedy happened there was no doubt in my mind that I'd get him a Cardinals casket because that's what he would have wanted…If we could have gotten him a Cardinals logo on his headstone, I would've done that, too…we live the Cardinals (Seminara 2010: 1).

While a Cardinals headstone was not available at the time of Chase Shaw's death, his father did arrange to have Chase's casket placed inside a burial vault adorned with the Cardinals logo, wherein he was dressed in a Cardinals jersey and hat and accompanied by a bat and a ball (ibid.).

For Shaw, the Cardinals represent everything that was special about his son: his sense of loyalty and devotion, but also his place with their family. Chase's love of the Cardinals reflected not only who he was as a person, it also represented who he was as a member of his own family. In noting that, "We live the Cardinals," Shaw himself even acknowledges that Chase's love of the Cardinals was not a love of his own. It could be suggested that Chase's love for the Cardinals was formed through shared dispositions and loyalties of the family in which he was a member; and that, for the Shaw family, the Cardinals represented a conduit of shared meaning, love, and affect (see Bourdieu 1984; Dunn 1998; Holt 2004; Foster 2007; Miller 1998).

In a similar gesture, some fans of the Chicago Cubs have chosen to be interred in a mausoleum especially designed for Cubs fans in Chicago, Illinois. Housed at the Bohemian National Cemetery, "Beyond The Vines" is an internment wall modeled after the ivy-covered centerfield wall at the Cubs' ballpark, Wrigley Field (see figure 14). Standing thirty-five feet

Figure 14. Beyond the Vines Mausoleum, Bohemian National Cemetery, Chicago, Illinois.

long and sixteen feet high, the wall accommodates two hundred eighty-eight spaces for Cubs

cremation urns and nameplates and is intended to create a "common ground" for the

congregation of Cubs fans, both living and dead. To give some indication as to the

motivation of those interred in the wall, testimony of the their friends and family

can be found on the Beyond The Vines website. Here, an anonymous person writes:

> My Brother passed away suddenly at the age of 45 and was a true cubs fan. He was
> dressed in Cubs gear from head to toe…and there were many people there who were
> in the their Cubs gear. They were there to celebrate his life. He would have loved it.
> We had Cubs flags to sign and even all the picture boards were done in Cubs. He will
> be placed at Beyond The Vines soon and it will be the happiest place for him to be
> with all of his Cubs fans… I am happy that there is a place that true Cubs fans can be
> placed forever and not have to be worried they may not have something in something
> in common with their neighbor for eternity.[5]

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[5] Anonymous, commented on Beyond The Vines website, entry posted 2009,
http://beyondthevines.net/default.aspx [accessed February 28, 2012].

From the described experiences of this person, it would seem that every attempt was made to present his or her brother as true Cubs fan, which was something distinct and unique about him as an individual. Dressed in Cubs gear from head to toe, he was interred in a Cubs themed mausoleum—which is to say that he was memorialized in a way not suited for just anybody. Yet, this person makes no mistake that being a Cubs fan is not a solitary matter. Many people are Cubs fans. Indeed, this man's memorial service consisted of fellow cubs fans that were also dressed in Cubs gear and sporting Cubs regalia. Likewise, he was interred in a mausoleum that houses no one but Cubs fans, where the rest of his friends and family apparently intend to be placed as well. What is observed here is the maintenance of out-group and in-group lifestyle distinctions, wherein groups differentiate themselves and stake claim to lifestyle practices by cultivating specific knowledge and appropriating certain objects and symbols that are used to signify either social belonging or discrimination (Dunn 2008; McCraken 1988). In this way, Beyond The Vines represents a medium through which individuals of shared dispositions and lifestyles can congregate, and thereby communicate to others that they are a group fans distinct from other groups of fans—such as Cardinals fans.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Individuality and Sociality

 While the deceased, as an individual, is often believed to be the focus of the funeral (at least within the examples provided here) the individual represents only a part of the whole. Individual spectators, celebrants, officiants, and family members each represent parts of the whole, or the group. However, because attention is often concentrated on the deceased individual in the event of a death, and thus not on the group as a whole, the public is not necessarily always conscious of the way in which events, such as funerals, maintain such a part-whole—individual-to-social—relationship.

 In general, all of my informants were direct in describing the funerals that we discussed as personal expressions of an individual who died. In most cases, my professional informants were most frank in describing these funerals as "celebrations" of individuality— often equating individuality with notions of personal lifestyle and taste. They regarded these funerals as reflections of individual autonomy, and equated them with the same freedom of self-definition, lifestyle maintenance, and personal taste that the deceased would have seemingly held while living. As such, they argued that these specific funeral products and practices mirror the way in which some individuals chose to use certain objects, symbols, and preferences in life, as a means of distinguishing themselves in contrast to others. My significant other informants, however, read less deeply into the funerals of their loved ones. For them, the funeral should be about the individual who died, simply because it is a time to honor the deceased and the way that he or she lived his or her life. They understood the

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funerals we discussed more as simple reflections of their loved one's former personalities and idiosyncratic lifestyles. Hence, these significant others argued that showcasing certain objects, symbols, and preferences that were associated with their significant other while living created the most effective way of communicating the unique qualities of his or her former life.

On the other hand, both sets of my informants also gave general implication that there is indeed a strong sociality, or "group dynamic," to the funerals, products, and practices they described. In one way, all of my informants located this sociality in the mere act of arranging or designing a funeral for an individual—either in shopping for various products, designing custom burial or cremation vessels, or orchestrating elaborate memorial services. Regardless of the means, method, or end-result, it was a family or social unit that accomplished each funeral planning these informants described. Importantly, several of my informants even went so far as to indicate that the planning of one's funeral in fact strengthened the social ties and familial bonds held between members of the group, as well as between group members and the deceased. This was certainly the case with Mark's family and the planning of his funeral, as described by his daughter, Leann. In another way, however, most of my informants further located this social component within the actual performance of the funeral—whether it is a memorial service, religious ceremony, or gravesite observance. These informants noted that these funerals provided family members, friends, and acquaintances the occasion to come together as a group in celebration of the deceased. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, they described these funerals as an opportunity for the group to reaffirm the deceased's membership within the group—may it be a family, a car club, or a community of specific sports fans.

Given mutual respect, I found that these individual and social components described by my informants reveal that the particular funerals they described are just as much about group cohesion as they are expressions of individuality. As such, I suggest that these seemingly unique funeral practices share more in common with traditional funerals than what would be expected. Most importantly, however, I argue that this part-whole relationship of mortuary practice indeed lends to a basic understanding of how and why the funeral has become, for some Americans, a site for commodity branding and consumer-centric expressions of distinction in times death. Here, I argue that within the funerals described by my informants, commodities, brands, and consumer preferences are used to not only negotiate expressions of distinction, but also further facilitate this individual-to-social relationship.

Distinction in Death

As noted in chapter two of this thesis, post-mortem expression of social standing has long been used in other mortuary traditions as a means of creating individual distinction on behalf of the deceased. In these instances, the expression of social position is further important in its ability to negotiate the part-whole relationship of the funeral ritual—the link between the individual and the social. Indeed, this general pattern of distinction in death appears to follow Bourdieu's framework for distinction quite well. For Bourdieu (1984), negotiations of distinction—the distinguishing of individuals through perceptions of taste and lifestyle—are manifested as expressions of social position within a hierarchical class structure. Importantly, he shows that these distinctions are often negotiated and maintained in the way people perceive and consume various cultural and material objects. Yet, none of my

informants offered any allusions to the expression of social position or class standing in the funerals, products, and performances they described.

While most of my informants did suggest that Bourdieu's notions of habitus and cultural capital strongly influenced their clients' or loved ones' conceptions of taste, lifestyle, and preferences for certain consumer goods, their perceptions of and motivations for creating and communicating distinction in these events of death did not seem to be consciously anchored in expressions of social standing and class position. Rather, my informants indicated that the communication of distinction in the funerals they described were motivated by two mutual components: the explicit desire to create divergence and communicate individuality, and the implicit desire to maintain similarity and group cohesion. Although not negotiated through displays of social standing, my informants did indicate that the link between the individual and the social in the funerals they described was indeed facilitated through the consumption and display of particular commodities, brands, and preferences. Indeed, this dynamic reflects the existing part-whole relationship previously mentioned and often found in mortuary rituals of the past, present, and in other cultures. However, it also follows the notion that some consumers—whether conscious of class or not—will use consumer goods and brands as a way to negotiate social positions along a "horizontal axis of noneconomic criteria" and thus maintain social distinctions by cultivating specific kinds of knowledge and/or appropriating certain material goods that are used as "telling signs" of either social belonging or discrimination (Dunn 2008: 123; McCraken 1988).

Therefore, although the funeral practices described by my informants seemed to be indeed patterned by Bourdieu-like concepts of habitus, cultural capital, lifestyle and taste, I did not, however, find the maintenance of hierarchical status distinctions in these practices.

Rather, I argue that the funerals described by my informants reveal what I suggest are "lateral" negotiations of distinction, communicated as either difference and autonomy or similarity and cohesion, which are, either way, expressed in both individual and social forms. In order to further explain, I will focus on Greg and Mark's funerals as primary examples of these forms of distinction.

As a matter of "individual distinction," these funeral practices offer the dead a final (re)affirmation of their previous tastes and lifestyle patterns. For instance, Greg's funeral— although provided by his family—was a final assertion of his loyal taste for Mopar and a final occasion to express the lifestyle that he fashioned around his preferred brand. In this way, his funeral was understood by those closest to him to be a final confirmation of his individuality. Likewise, each of the professional informants of this study expressed how many of their customers desired a similar expression of personal (re)affirmation for themselves and/or their loved ones' funerals.

Such was the case with Mark's life and death as well. However, aside from asserting his loyalty to Ford, Mark clearly made a conscious effort to maintain a stark distinction as a man of Ford brand automobiles—not only to express his personal disposition for Ford, but also to *differentiate* himself from those who prefer the "rival" Chevy brand. In this way, as a further means of individual distinction, these funerals also offer a way of dissociating one's self from others. Indeed, Jones and Van Eywk both agree that most of their customers use brands in funerals as a way of intentionally distinguishing themselves, or their loved ones, from other individuals, living or dead. Like Mark, Greg's individual attachment to Mopar-made automobiles made him distinct from loyalists of any other automobile brands—such as Mark. A similar case could be made for those who identify with a particular sports team; to

display the logo of a favorite sports team is to communicate that one is not necessarily the fan of other, rival, teams. Thus, to say that one is a "Cardinals fan" or a "Ford man" is simultaneously communicate that he or she in *not*, for example, a "Cubs fan" or a "Chevy man."

Yet, like that of patterns of individual distinction, these funerals also offer a way for *groups* to dissociate themselves from other groups. Continuing to use Mark and Greg's funerals as examples, both were occasions for their families and friends to distinguish themselves, with their dead members, from other groups loyal to other automotive brands—groups such as one another. Again, in a similar way, for a group to collectively display the logo of a favorite sports team—at a baseball game as at a funeral—is to communicate that they are collectively not necessarily fans of any other, rival, team. Thus, to say that, "We are Cardinals fans," or "We are a Ford family," is simultaneously communicate that "We are *not*," for example, "Cubs fans" or "a Chevy family."

While these patterns of distinction shape one's position in the social world in contrast to others, these funerals also provide the dead with a final (re)affirmation of his or her place within a group of individuals of shared tastes and similar lifestyles in terms of "group distinction." In the case of Greg's funeral, his friends and family not only asserted Greg's personal taste for Mopar cars or his lifestyle as a Mopar loyalist, they were both knowingly and unknowingly reaffirming his strong family ties with the Mopar brand as well as his place within a community of Mopar collectors and loyalists. With Greg's funeral, just as with his former car show, Greg's friends and family have found a social event in which they can confirm, "We are Mopar people, and Greg was/is one of us." In this way group distinction is

also a matter of cohesion, binding like-minded individuals together through shared dispositions and lifestyles.

In arguing that these funerals are a means of distinguishing individuality as much as they are about negotiating social relationships between the living and the dead, I must contend that the funerals described here reveal a paradox in the notion of a "personalized" or "individualized" funeral. By incorporating mass-consumed and publicly recognized commodities, brands, and symbols into the products and performances of the funeral, this desire to claim individuality in death inadvertently leads to outward conformity. Thus the point to be made by addressing this apparent paradox is to reaffirm that the mass consumption of branded commodities—like rites of death, mortuary rituals, and funeral practices—is unavoidably social. As groups and communities we attend wakes, burials, and memorial services of individuals *together*, often as families and friends with shared life experiences and cultural inflections. Even as a nation we *collectively* honor fallen soldiers and leaders, and *together* we share in the mourning of dead celebrities. Yet, attention is often concentrated on the deceased individual in the event of a death, and thus not on the group as a whole. As such, we as a public are not necessarily always conscious of the way in which events of death maintain an inherent sense of sociality—however explicit or disguised. And in the end, even these commodity-branded and consumer-themed funeral practices, so seemingly designed as pinnacle means of self-expression, are indeed important reflections how we as people will find even the most unobvious ways to connect and reconnect with others—in life as well as in death.

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