

# **Cake and Death: Three Death Cafés in South Africa**

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## **DECLARATION**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with three Death Cafés (DC) in South Africa and the individuals that gave shape to and engaged with these DCs. The DC is an international movement and social franchise that was founded in 2011 in London, that aims to break the social “taboo” around discussing death and dying. The DC is held in pop-up locations, where individuals can come together, eat cake and discuss death. In common with the DC’s audience, academic literature has long held that people in the West did not talk about death and had an uncomfortable relationship with it. The DC has grown enormously popular in various countries throughout the world since then and in 2017 reached South African shores. Within a year, eight DCs and a Facebook DC had sprung up in the country. It attracted mainly white people, particularly people who were trying to defy the repressive boundaries of what it meant to be white. I did ethnographic research on two DCs in Cape Town and approached the DC’s Facebook site netnographically. At the Kenilworth DC, held at a Buddhist centre, the core group of attendees knew one another well and talked about death and dying in ways that conformed to a self-authorising New Ageist practice that embraced alternative, spiritual paths and “journeys”. The Woodstock DC, my other field site, looked very different. Here, a changing group of creative and academic attendees spoke about death in decidedly secular ways, often using humour. Their use of humour served on the one hand to set the living apart from the “foolish” dead and from an outside, (white) public that supposedly repressed talk around the topic of death. Online, the Facebook DC was a very different ‘social’ space that was largely defined by the memes, quotes and photos that users shared about death while community interaction was minimal. On Facebook, the DC was again a largely white group of people, with a number of participants also active in physical DCs. Here, talk about death was largely taken over by visuals that dealt with death while users usually only engaged other users over controversial topics. Given that the DC falls under the recent “death positive” movement, my research situates whether or not these traditionally ‘taboo’ notions of death and dying were changing for white South Africans? This thesis troubles that supposed taboo in terms of deaths prominence within the language of infotainment commodities. What we see here, even in a small death-positive group in South Africa, are salient internal diversity and divisions. It outlines how the Death Café serves to soften this supposed taboo, and the ways in which these groups consciously transgress the boundaries of what it means to be properly white.

## OPSOMMING

Die volgende proefskrif handel oor drie Doodskafees (DK) sowel oor die individue wat betrokke was by en gestalte gegee het aan hierdie Doodskafees. Die DK is 'n internasionale beweging- en sosiale konsessie wat in 2011 in Londen gestig is en ten doel het om die sosiale “taboe” rondom die bespreking van die dood en sterwe te breek. Die DK word in “pop-up” plekke gehou waar individue kan saankom, koek eet en die dood bespreek. In gemeen met die DK se gehoor het akademiese literatuur al lank geglo dat mense in die Weste nie oor die dood gepraat het nie en n ongemaklike verhouding daarmee gehad het. Sedertdien het die DK in verskillende lande regoor die wêreld gewild geword en in 2017 Suid-Afrikaanse oewers bereik. Binne 'n jaar het agt DK's sowel as n DK op Facebook in die land ontstaan. Dit het veral witmense aangetrek – veral mense wat probeer het om die onderdrukkende grense van wat dit beteken om wit te wees, te trotseer. Ek het etnografiese navorsing oor twee DK's in Kaapstad gedoen en die DK se Facebook webtuiste netnografies benader. In die DK in Kenilworth wat in n Boeddhistiese sentrum gehou word, het die kerngroep deelnemers mekaar goed geken en gepraat oor die dood en sterf op maniere wat ooreenstem met 'n “New-Age”-istiese praktyk wat alternatiewe, geestelike paaie en ‘reise’ insluit. Die DK in Woodstock, my ander veldwerk, het heel anders gelyk. Hier het 'n veranderende groep kreatiewe en akademiese deelnemers op sekulêre maniere oor die dood gepraat en dikwels van humor gebruik gemaak. Hul gebruik van humor het enersyds gedien om die lewendes te onderskei van die “dwase” dooies en van 'n buitestaande, “wit” publiek wat kwansuis die onderwerp van dood onderdruk het. Aanlyn was die DK op Facebook 'n heel ander ‘sosiale’ ruimte wat grotendeels gedefinieer is deur die “memes”, aanhalings en fotos wat verbruikers oor die dood gedeel het, terwyl gemeenskapsinteraksie minimaal was. Op Facebook was die DK weer 'n grotendeels blanke groep mense met 'n aantal deelnemers wat ook aktief was in a fisiese DK. Hier is die praatjies oor die dood grotendeels oorgeneem deur beeldmaterial wat handel oor die dood, terwyl verbruikers gewoonlik net ander verbruikers oor kontroversiële onderwerpe betrek het. Aangesien die DK onder die onlangse “doodspositiese” beweging val”, bepaal my navorsing of hierdie tradisionele ‘taboe’-opvattinge oor die dood en sterwe vir wit Suid-Afrikaners verander het. Hierdie proefskrif steur die veronderstelde taboe in terme van sterftes in die taal van inligtingstukke. Wat ons hier sien, selfs in 'n klein doodspositiese groep in Suid-Afrika, is 'n opvallende interne diversiteit en verdeeldheid. Dit gee 'n uiteensetting van hoe die Doodskafee hierdie vermeende taboe versag, en die maniere waarop hierdie groepe die grense van wat dit beteken om werklik wit te wees, bewustelik oorskry.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

APLA – Azanian People’s Liberation Army  
BHA – British Humanist Association  
COPE – Congress of the People  
DC – Death Café  
DMT – Dimethyltryptamine  
FoRDA – Friends of Richard Dawkins Association  
GMP – Gloria Memorial Park  
ICSA - Independent Crematoriums South Africa  
ICU – Intensive Care Unit  
LGBT+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender plus – identities  
PLR – Past Life Regression  
PTSD – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder  
SA – South Africa  
SASS – South African Secular Society  
UCT – University of Cape Town  
USA – United States of America  
UK – United Kingdom

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*Patch Adams: Death. To die. To expire. To pass on. To perish. To peg out. To push up daisies. To push up posies. To become extinct. Curtains, deceased, demised, departed and defunct. Dead as a doornail. Dead as a herring. Dead as a mutton. Dead as nits. The last breath. Paying a debt to nature. The big sleep. God's way of saying, "Slow down."*

*Bill Davis: To check out.*

*Patch Adams: To shuffle off this mortal coil.*

*Bill Davis: To head for the happy hunting ground.*

*Patch Adams: To blink for an exceptionally long period of time.*

*Bill Davis: To find oneself without breath.*

*Patch Adams: To be the incredible decaying man.*

*Bill Davis: Worm buffet.*

*Patch Adams: Kick the bucket.*

*Bill Davis: Buy the farm.*

*Patch Adams: Take the cab.*

*Bill Davis: Cash in your chips.*

-Patch Adams (1998)

# ONE | INTRODUCTION

## THE DEATH CAFÉ

The Death Café (DC) is a non-profit, international movement and “social franchise” founded in 2011 by a man called Jon Underwood in Hackney, East London. The central idea of the DC is for interested individuals to have “meaningful conversations about death in a comfortable and open setting”, (Barksy, n.d.) often involving tea, coffee and cake, and with no intended outcome. The DC’s objective is to “increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives” (Death Café, 2018: 8). DCs are held on a monthly basis at pop-up locations such as in homes, centres, rented-out cafés and bars while a couple of DCs have also sprung up on online spaces, such as Facebook. The main resource hub for information pertaining to the DC is its website ([www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com)), which offers a free, downloadable guide for any individual(s) interested in hosting a DC. Since the DC is a “free affiliate scheme”, potential hosts have to keep the DC name in their events and post events to the website. The guide covers what one needs in order to host a DC, how to facilitate a DC, information on venues and refreshments, and sponsorship. While the DC is “open to, and respectful of, people of all communities and belief systems”, its guide states that it “can be very good ... to have DCs for specific communities and belief systems” (Death Café, 2018: 6). And indeed, there are specific DCs for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender plus (LGBT+) and homeless communities (Death Café, 2018).



Figure 1: Screenshot of "Worldwide Map" on Death Café website (2020). Source: [www.deathcafe.com/map/](http://www.deathcafe.com/map/)

Underwood's idea of a DC was based on Swiss sociologist, Bernard Crettaz's *Café Mortel*. Founded in 2004 in Neuchatel, Switzerland, the *Café Mortel* movement aimed to break the "tyrannical secrecy" around death and dying (Guinness, 2010). Using the model of *Café Mortel* as inspiration, Jon Underwood quit his job as a web developer and established the DC in London. The movement quickly grew and in 2012, Lizzy Miles, a hospice care worker from Ohio, founded the first DC in the United States of America (USA) (Lloyd, 2013). In 2014, a DC in Hong Kong was established (Choi, 2014). Before long, Underwood's DC had branches in 73 countries all over the world. In June 2017, Underwood died suddenly from acute promyelocytic leukaemia. His mother, Susan Barsky Reid, and sister, Jools Barsky, continued the DC "mission" (Baldwin, 2017). As of 14 July 2020, there were 11 144 DCs around the world (see Figure 1).

Attending a DC is free, but most accept "specific" or "non-specific" (Death Café, 2018: 9) voluntary donations to cover the costs of refreshments and location rental. The guide states that DC cannot exclude someone from participating in a DC if they did not donate. As an organisation, the DC prohibits contributions from large private sector organisations working with death and dying, political organisations, as well as campaign groups that are involved in contentious issues around death and dying, for example the right-to-die with dignity campaigns.

Many journalists have attended DCs around the world and have written quite extensively about the movement and its mission in various locations (Conner, 2018; Barsky, 2019; Viera, 2019). As an organisation, the DC welcomes press coverage, with several international journalists stating that its talks about death facilitated "conscious living for a better world" (Brayne, 2020) and allowed individuals to "mak[e] the most of life" (Lloyd, 2013). The DC community's visibility also extends into the realm of social media, where it has gained a lot of traction in online blogs and media platforms. Searching the hashtag #DeathCafe on Instagram and Twitter leads to a range of images, memes, and information about the DC. However, community participation on social media is most overtly "social" in the instance of Facebook. Globally, there are Facebook pages for DCs in many countries and in the USA, for most states.

In South Africa, the DC was first mentioned in 2013 when South African author, Helena Dolny, toyed with the idea of starting the first DC in Johannesburg in an article entitled, *Let's talk about Dying: Talking coffins over coffee* (Dolny, 2013). She said that she was inspired by courses ran by the University of the Third Age, an organisation that catered to elderly people's need to talk about death. In the article, she framed the DC as a means to break the South African taboo around talking about death and dying (Dolny, 2013). Although I found no evidence that the DC in South Africa began earlier than 2017, it is possible that close-knit groups might have organised DCs in more intimate environments, such as people's homes, and without posting promotional

content on the website. According to one of the DC hosts, George,<sup>1</sup> the first (publicised) DC was founded in 2017 in Woodstock, Cape Town.

I first heard of the DC in 2018 through my aunt, a corporate businesswoman, and “conscious explorer” based in Cape Town. She was an enthusiastic attendee at a small home-based DC in Rondebosch. Immediately fascinated, I decided to do my Masters thesis on this movement and started fieldwork on 12 March 2018. At the time of my fieldwork, the DC website suggested that there were eight active DCs in South Africa; four in Gauteng and four in the Western Cape. I attended my first DC in Woodstock and one of the first people I met was Claire Keeton, a journalist for the *Times*. On 1 April 2018, her article, *A Slice of Death Over Coffee*, featured in “the death issue” of the newspaper’s Lifestyle section. It opened with, “DC flouts taboos by breaking the silence around mortality” before discussing the “strangely comforting conversations of [our] own mortality and experience of death”, especially one session that centred around “our freedom to choose death” (Keeton, 2018). After a short biography of the host, George, her article uncovered aspects of end-of-life care, the “welcome[d] unpredictability” of the DC, the inevitable laughter that occurred during the sessions, and the history of the DC. She ended the piece by describing the DC as “a powerful force” that she would attend again (Keeton, 2018).

Prior to Keeton’s article, Petru Saal published an article on the “Deep South”<sup>2</sup> DC in March 2018. Her article in the *Business Day* included an interview with Jean Dixon, who had founded the Deep South DC in 2017. The article, entitled *Talking about dying over cake at Death Café*, spoke about the “discomfort” that many South Africans had talking about death and said that the DC broke this stigma without becoming “a religious thing” (Saal, 2018). In the article, Dixon stated that death “is the inevitable and people try and avoid the inevitable” (Saal, 2018). These newspaper articles joined a range of others on the DC worldwide and reflected the increasing popularity of the DC.

The popularity and growth of the DC has also attracted some academic interest. Emily Tupper’s (2015) dissertation on the DC in Edinburgh, Scotland, argued that besides facilitating a space where people exchanged ideas and engaged with death and dying, the DC was also a forum where attendees could critique public and medicalised discourses around death and dying. Tupper (2015: 25) also showed that humour and laughing played an important role within the DC space,

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymised.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as the Fish Hoek or Glencairn Death Café because of venue changes. The Deep South Death Café was held in the Southern Peninsula of Cape Town yet its core facilitators (mostly) remained the same. For the duration of my research, it was named the “Glencairn” DC by my interlocutors.

demarcating those within from the public discourse that shaped and repressed death talk, ultimately “dissolv[ing] fear and constitut[ing] sociality”.

The DC was not the only movement that intended to put the conversation about death and dying into the public realm. DignitySA,<sup>3</sup> an organisation that politically advocates for the right-to-die with dignity, has been very visible in South Africa. In 2010, their cause received much publicity when their founder and director, Sean Davison, was arrested in New Zealand for the attempted murder of his terminally ill mother. Prior to his trial in 2011, Archbishop Desmond Tutu expressed his support for Davison, penning a letter to the New Zealand High Court pleading for a lenient sentence. After entering a guilty plea to the assisted suicide of his mother at his trial, Davison received a sentence of five months home detention. Seven years later, in 2018, he was charged for the assisted murder of Dr. Anrich Burger in South Africa. The prosecution brought two more charges to his indictment stemming from the 2015 assisted suicides of Justin Varian and Richard Holland. Davison denied all charges.<sup>4</sup> He made his first court appearance in April 2019 (Shoba, 2019). In June 2019, he was found guilty on these charges, but the Western Cape High Court suspended his eight-year sentence, with three-years conditional house arrest (Dinnie, 2019). Archbishop Desmond Tutu continued to defend and support Sean Davison and is a keen supporter of the right-to-die initiative (Anon, 2018).

Davison was the head executive of DignitySA and the ‘poster boy’ for the legalisation of assisted euthanasia in South Africa. His case has been a hotly debated topic in South African media that has stimulated public interest and discussion about assisted suicide and “advanced directives” (Holmes, 2013). Notably, the Congress of the People (COPE),<sup>5</sup> a South African political party, forwarded a motion in 2018 in parliament to make “advanced directives” a constitutional right (Madisa, 2018).

## CONTEMPLATING DEATH IN THE WEST

The motivation of the DC, to break the social taboo around death talk, echoes an argument that has long been made in social research on the West. In 1955, Geoffrey Gorer argued that after the Second World War, “Anglo-Saxon society” saw an enormous shift in the ways that people spoke about and dealt with death. Once accepted as a natural part of life and as an event that happened

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<sup>3</sup> DignitySA aims for “a world where every individual is afforded the basic human right to self-autonomy in end-of-life decisions” (DignitySA, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> See Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sean\\_Davison](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sean_Davison)

<sup>5</sup> COPE was formed in 2008 by former members of the African National Congress (ANC). COPE’s policy engenders multicultural and multiracial participation in governance. Excerpts in its manifesto state that COPE aims for principles of enlightened self-interest and good faith (COPE, 2019).

in the home and in a social setting, death in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the West became as “unmentionable” as sex had been in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Suddenly, death and decay became “too horrible to contemplate or discuss” (Gorer, 1955: 51). Gorer (1955: 52) argued that such censoring of death, an “increased prudery”, made death an object of secretive consumption and led to a “pornography of death”.

In the 1970s, Ernest Becker (1973) and Aries (1974) returned to the problematic of death’s denial in the West. In *The Denial of Death*, Becker (1973) argued that symbolic belief systems in the West, such as religion and science, were “immortality projects” that acted as “a reflex of the terror of death”. Aries (1974: 85) similarly argued that death and dying became publicly “forbidden” and avoided in modern western societies where people’s proximity to the dead had decreased. The “tame deaths” of the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, traditionally marked by public rituals in the home (organised by the dying person), the “coexistence of the living and the dead”, and solemn displays with no “theatrics” or “emotion” gave way to a sterile, individual and medicalised death (Aries, 1974: 14; 13-14). This, in turn, led to a “death denial culture” in which death became an “unnameable” subject (Aries, 1974: 106; cf. Green 2008). For many social scientists, post-World War II American culture embodied this shift (Foltyn, 2017; Green, 2008; Kaufman & Morgan, 2005). Here, the extreme privatisation of death and its taboo status saw death not only turned into “porn” (Gorer, 1955), but dead bodies into consumer objects “voyeuristically explored” through popular media (Foltyn, 2017: 168-169). The transformation of corpses into consumer objects was paralleled by the transformation of American funerals into a mass commercialised industry (Mitford, 1963).

Social scientists were particularly interested in the role that hospitals played in the Western shift away from ‘social ’and ritualised death. As hospitals increasingly staved off death through the use of life-extending technologies, medical authorities became increasingly important in the management of death and dying (Green, 2008; Kaufman & Morgan, 2005). Hospital death and life extending technology reified the relationship between people and the state (Kaufman & Morgan, 2005), drawing increasing attention to Foucault (1978)’s “biopower” and the bureaucratisation of matters of life and death. Thus, social scientists showed, people started equating a “good” death with one that came at an advanced age and that was ideally pain-free, dignified, comfortable and quiet, often mediated by medical intervention (Green 2008). Green (2008) attributed the western trope of “the good death” to Kübler-Ross’s model for communication around death as being an “opportunity for growth” (Kübler-Ross, 1975: 163; cf. Kübler-Ross, 1969). This idealisation of a dignified death led to the founding of the hospice care movement in the 1960s (Seale, 1998) and a body of academic work on its relationship and

mediation to death (Kaufman & Morgan, 2005: 327). More recent work on death in the West has suggested a change in these patterns. In his review of more recent literature on death and dying, Engelke (2019) showed that increasing numbers of people in the West rejected the funeral industry, ostentatious displays during burials, and biomedicine's role in mediating death; people increasingly embraced the desire for a "natural" death, death *doulas*<sup>6</sup> and home funerals.

Against the work on death in the West, many anthropologists have long described a particular ease that *other* societies and *other* people had around death, sometimes drawing direct comparisons with their own experiences in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the USA. For instance, Godfrey Wilson (1939) explicitly compared the Nyakusa burial rites' joyous social celebrations with the sombre, fearful death rituals in England. Early work on death rituals in Africa and Asia showed particular interest in the supposed universal structure of such rituals. Drawing on the work of Arnold van Gennep (2004[1909]), these anthropologists often described death as a rite of passage, a necessary 'liminal' transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead (cf. Deng, 1972; Evans-Pritchard, 1948; Turner, 1969: 365; Turner, 1974: 359). In the 1970s, anthropologists became more interested in the symbolic and ritual dimensions of death, showing that for people outside the West, death was ritually and symbolically extensively elaborated (Turner, 1975; Bloch & Parry, 1982; Huntington & Metcalfe, 1991). Throughout this body of work, anthropologists emphasised that in societies outside the West, death was often a social transition that whole communities marked ritually, often transforming individuals into ancestors. Death also had a fundamental impact on reshaping kinship, economic and exchange relationships (Golomski, 2018). As the discipline became more interested in embodiment and the senses, anthropologists in the 1990s started asking questions about the emotional experiences of death and whether all people mourned death in the same way. Rosaldo (2005) famously asserted that among the Ilongot in the Philippines, rage was the culturally appropriate response to death, an emotion that was only quelled by headhunting. Similarly, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) argued that in Alto do Cruzeiro, Brazil, mothers' responses to early child deaths were culturally conditioned and approximated pity rather than deep sadness.

The contrast between this body of work and assumptions about Western death was stark (Engelke, 2019). Perhaps not surprisingly, early anthropologists were alarmed over the impact that colonialism and conversion to world religions had on 'their' locals – and specifically to death rituals. Lee and Vaughan (2008: 352), for instance, showed how the conversion to Christianity fundamentally changed Africans' relationship to death, remaking space (the erection of

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<sup>6</sup> A death "*doula*", the Greek derivation for "female servant", is a vocation committed to seeing patients through their last stage of life (Blumberg, 2017).

cemeteries) and beliefs about the body. More recently, anthropologists have been concerned at the impact that globalisation and modernity has had on the ways that previously ‘traditional’ communities dealt with death. In this vein, Van Der Geest (2006) delineated the transformation of Akan funerals in Kwahu, Ghana. Here, deaths used to occur in the home, and funerals incurred minimal costs because they were held a day after death and close to peoples’ homes. By the time of his research, dying in the hospital meant that the body could be easily transported to the mortuary while “well-to-do relatives” abroad often financed quite elaborate funerals that reflected the family’s status and prestige (Van der Geest, 2006). Despite the transformation of Akan funerals into more professionalised and commercialised events, Van Der Geest (2006: 487) insisted that religious and political beliefs, especially about ancestorhood, remained deeply enmeshed within these grand (new) customs.

## **DEATH IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Historical work on death and funeral culture in South Africa showed that the colonial and apartheid governments’ treatment of the living extended to the dead; the state did not treat all dead bodies equally (Dennie, 2009; Engelke, 2019: 34). Looking at pauper burials in Johannesburg as a lens on the colonial government’s treatment of Black<sup>7</sup> bodies more generally, Denie (2009) showed how the municipality separated bodies on racial lines and visited numerous indignities on Black corpses. Horrified by such treatment, Denie (2009) showed how Black communities formed vanguard burial societies to offer Black people in cities dignified funerals – a massive enterprise that has persisted to this day. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, anthropologists and other social scientists showed how the violence of the colonial and apartheid past came to haunt South African institutions as they had to deal with the legacies of unethically obtained (Black) human remains in their collections (Davison, 2011; Finnegan, Hart & Halkett, 2011; Schramm, 2016). These exhumed and unburied human remains were not only hotly contested but became symbolic embodiments of the violence of the colonial and apartheid past and the racial inequalities it produced in life and death.

During apartheid, copious research was done on Black people’s ritually elaborate and symbolic commemorations of death (Lee & Vaughn, 2008: 341-359). Several anthropologists drew particular attention to notions of ancestorhood, or “how life persists” after death in Black communities (Engelke, 2019: 30). Ngubane (1976), for instance, described how married women

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<sup>7</sup> South Africans still used racial categories established during apartheid to refer to other people and themselves, I follow their own social identifications in this thesis.

in Zulu patrilineal society held the social function of being the channel through which communication between “this world” and the “*other*”, ancestral world, occurred. Another topic that held anthropologists’ interests in this regard was the emphasis that many local communities placed on the social “pollution” of death and how people ritually dealt with this and the social reproduction necessitated by death (Ngubane 1976; Pauw 1980).

With the HIV/AIDS epidemic starting in the late 1980s, social scientists drew renewed attention to the ways in which Black South Africans viewed death and dying; how long-standing customs changed in the face of the epidemic, and how social networks frayed under its impact. There was specific interest in the social and biological deaths of AIDS and how the stigma around AIDS deaths was deeply enmeshed in the old language of putrescence and “pollution” (Engelke, 2019; Niehaus, 2007). Looking at HIV stigma in the South African Lowveld, Niehaus (2007: 845) showed how afflicted individuals were constructed as being “dead before dying”, dangerous and socially estranged whilst they waited for death. Anthropologists also looked at how caring for those dying placed enormous strain on kin and community social networks (Henderson, 2004; Henderson, 2011). The massive surge of NGO interventions also had an impact on how the epidemic – and death – were viewed. In his study of one of these NGOs, Robins (2006: 2) showed how intervention managed to transform perceptions that an HIV/AIDS diagnosis placed one “near death” to perceptions that it could lead to “new life”. In nearby Swaziland, Golomski (2018) drew attention to the expansive funerary industry that arose in the wake of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in that country. In *Funeral Culture*, he argued that in its inability to deal with the mass deaths from AIDS, the royalist state ceased ground to the expansive funerary market (Golomski, 2018). And while funerals and commemorations for the dead took on a more global role and audience, they retained many traditional elements (Golomski, 2018).

With universal access to antiretrovirals in South Africa and a significant drop in AIDS-related deaths, a few social scientists started drawing attention to Black burial societies and their role in the mediation of traditional mourning processes and economic preparations for death (Bähre, 2007; Lee & Vaughan, 2008; Lee, 2011). Bähre’s (2007: 51-52) work, in particular, drew attention to the immense social conflict that occurred in the wake of death and the many social accommodations that are made within a burial society to keep it functioning.

In this large corpus of work on death in South Africa, very little research has been done on the ways in which white South Africans buried their dead or talked about death. In their comprehensive overview of this literature, Lee and Vaughn (2008), for instance, did not mention a single study on white South Africans. Work on white deaths, where it exists, largely centred on the political power and symbolic meanings of apartheid state funerals (Perry & Perry, 1991: 167-

183; Posel, 2009: 331-350). For the most part, social scientists have placed little emphasis on white deaths and assumed that there was nothing interesting about them or in the ways in which white people spoke about death. While I disagree, the DC's framing of its work in South Africa and how its (mainly white) participants spoke about death, indicated that they believed that whites in South Africa thought about and dealt with death in ways similar to that described for Western deaths in the literature. And yet, various newspaper articles and online chats seemed to suggest that "white people" in South Africa did not resist the DC or even complain about its breaking of a taboo. In a context where whites were routinely stereotyped as people who complained and grumbled about a wide range of social issues (Joubert, 2019), this was noteworthy. In fact, it seemed that (white) people welcomed the DC and that it was growing. Were whites<sup>8</sup> in South Africa, like Engelke's (2015) humanists in the UK, turning their backs on the ways in which they 'traditionally'<sup>9</sup> dealt with death? I wanted to find out.

### **SKETCHING THE SACRED/HYBRID IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA**

I studied two DCs in Cape Town, a city that, at the time of my research, was largely spatially segregated along racial lines. Chidester (2000: 8) called Cape Town "a sight of contradictions", where its iconic Table Mountain represented both a "protective embrace and monstrous evil". As such, the apartheid government's Group Areas Act of 1951 mandated that all areas in the city reflect its vision of exclusive racial groups. A number of 'mixed' neighbourhoods, most famously District Six,<sup>10</sup> were turned into whites-only areas through forced removals (Chidester, 2000: 14-15). Forced removals relocated some sixty thousand people from District Six to the wind-swept Cape Flats on the outskirts of the city. This area became densely populated and saw high unemployment, extreme poverty, disease and gang violence. Conversely, the apartheid state created a "highly charged imagery of purity and danger", whereby the social order of white citizens embodied employment, wealth, health and, Christian values while Black people symbolised the opposite (Chidester, 2000: 8, 15). Despite the fall of apartheid in 1994, Cape Town's population continues to make competing claims on urban space, where the "scars of the

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<sup>8</sup> I am aware that whites in South Africa are not a homogenous group: there are various distinctions between Afrikaans- and English-speaking people, as well as, class differences. I use the term here similarly to how media situates white and Black South Africans. Not to mark a reified category of persons but to reflect my interlocutors', English-speaking whites, use and understanding of the word. In many respects, people in South Africa still use the apartheid racial categories to define and distinguish people.

<sup>9</sup> A tradition that the literature claims to start after the Second World War.

<sup>10</sup> In 1966, the state declared District Six a whites-only suburb. Despite massive resistance by several members of the District Six community, the area was demolished in the 1970s (South African History Archive, 2010). Now, an open field, District Six has been celebrated as a sacred national heritage site.

city”, like the empty space of District Six, remain contested zones of religious and cultural significance (Chidester, 2000: 33, 9).

These scars can be traced in the city’s graveyards and places of dying. For instance, the whites-only graveyard of St Paul’s in Rondebosch features lush undergrowth, a stone terrace, ordered headstones and has been continually maintained despite there being no burials at St Paul’s since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Conversely, the Gloria Memorial Park (GMP) cemetery in the Cape Flats has been desecrated, with fallen headstones and unkempt grounds. Although there has been a shortage of burial space in more than half of the burial grounds in Cape Town, the GMP continues to bury bodies there. At the time of my research, the City of Cape Town had 38 municipal burial grounds, one above-ground (mausoleum)<sup>11</sup> facility and three public crematoria facilities (City of Cape Town, 2020). In many respects, these municipal burial grounds mirror the differences between St Paul’s and GMP; those in former “Black” and “Coloured” areas are either visibly neglected or have poorer facilities than cemeteries in former “white” areas.

According to the city, its Muslim and Orthodox Jewish residents traditionally preferred burials that took place in religiously and racially exclusive cemeteries (City of Cape Town, 2020). In 2018, Muslim and Jewish citizens in Cape Town were in uproar when the backlog at mortuaries meant that they could not bury their loved ones as per custom. Morgues were holding bodies for up to six days to perform autopsies (Anderson, 2018). Moreover, the city was running out of burial space and could not expand into new land because of groundwater that was too close to the surface (City of Cape Town, 2020; Naidoo, 2019). The municipality encouraged people to reopen family graves<sup>12</sup> to save space (Naidoo, 2019) and to use the public mausoleum at the Maitland Cemetery<sup>13</sup> (ICSA, 2015). During this time, both the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University, 50 kilometres from Cape Town, aggressively promoted their body donation programs; offering to cover the costs of transportation and cremation of those donated bodies (University of Cape Town, n.d.). The majority of bodies donated to science were white (Gangata, Ntobo, Akol, & Louw, 2010: 174-183).

Separate to the City of Cape Town’s services, there are private crematoria aplenty, with 12 companies falling under the Independent Crematoriums South Africa (ICSA) parent company in the city. The ICSA made provisions for “personalised and Dignified Services” for Christian, Catholic and secular denominations (ICSA, 2015). The organisation stated that the most common

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<sup>11</sup>A recent burial option after burial and cremation. A mausoleum is an above-ground crypt that accommodates human remains. It also mitigates the problem of burial space on grounds (The City of Cape Town, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Private graves that house ashes and coffins for families that wish to be laid to rest together. They are also a means for saving space (City of Cape Town, n.d.)

<sup>13</sup> The mausoleum consists of 144 crypts that endures all weather conditions. There little risk of vandalism and minimal maintenance.

choice for Christian burial among whites was cremation (ICSA, 2015) while Naidoo (2019) showed that Black Christians preferred burials.

The only green (or eco-) burial (Wilson-Späth, 2015) site near the city is at Wiesenhof Natural Reserve, just outside Stellenbosch. While popular, the Reserve's sea-grass coffins and burial in an indigenous forest came with "a stiff price tag"<sup>14</sup> that was out of reach for most households (Anon, 2011), even though insurance policies for most middle-income funerals amount to about R50 000 (Anon, 2018). White people were most likely to opt for a green burial in this reserve, apparently for economic and 'cultural' reasons (Simjee, 2018).

The differences in burial practices, as well as the "scars" of these locations within Cape Town's deathscape reify the marked racial divisions of both the living and the dead and act as stark reminders of the violence of Cape Town's colonial and apartheid past. A number of social scientists working on the city have shown that its white inhabitants were not completely oblivious to this past and that in the post-apartheid era, groups of whites grappled with the inadequacies of political change (Besteman, 2008). While some have turned to political action, others have attempted to bridge the cultural divide with Black countrymen through more religious channels and changed cultural practices. Focusing on one such group, Teppo (2011:226) showed how a group of white *sangomas* (traditional healers) attempted to defy the "boundaries of proper whiteness" and resist their own "repressive boundaries" by engaging in "heterotopic" spaces. Her work referenced a wider body of literature on New Ageism (Steyn, 1994) and alternative religion among white South Africans (Falkof, 2010).

In this thesis, I look at another 'alternative' and expressly transgressive (largely) white group who tried to transcend the supposed (white) taboo around the topic of death and dying in Cape Town. In many respects, the DCs I studied did this transgressive work based on a reading of the South African public sphere as echoing Gorer (1955), Aries (1974) and Becker's (1973) descriptions of death cultures in the West; where people were so removed from death that its consumption approximated pornography and talk about it was taboo.

## FIELDWORK

My research centred around ethnographic fieldwork in two DCs in Cape Town, one in Kenilworth and one in Woodstock. After locating information about each DC on Google, I sent the two hosts an email, intending to do research in each space. Both hosts agreed to my requests in their responses. Altogether, I attended seven DC sessions at both Kenilworth and Woodstock and

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<sup>14</sup> Simjee (2018) said that reserving a plot at Wiesenhof cost R28 000.

interviewed the hosts from each of the two Cafés. Since the DCs were only held once a month, I supplemented my fieldnotes on these meetings with interviews with five attendees; two from Kenilworth, one from Woodstock, and two that attended both DCs. Individual interviews lasted between an hour to two hours and were based on a semi-structured interview guide. I had one follow-up interview with each of my interviewees and stayed in touch with all my interlocutors over Whatsapp, and email. Three interlocutors in particular were interested in my findings and texted me asking about this – and about the themes that cropped up in my research. I was happy to comply, especially after these emails resulted in further interactions and suggestions from my interlocutors about additional sources for my research and interesting connections with similar groups.

Complementary to the physical DC spaces, I decided to also research the DCs online, but this posed a few challenges. First of all, establishing which multimedia forum would be most beneficial to analyse the digital social life of the South African DCs was difficult because the DC was featured in podcasts, Twitter and Instagram pages. Facebook proved to be the most useful platform in understanding the social lives of the DC South Africa's user dynamics, because this platform saw the most amount of 'community' engagement. I chose to employ netnography as my methodology here (Kozinets 2015). The second challenge with the digital site was that it was hard to get people to respond to requests for interviews. I reached out to four members of the group over Facebook messenger and email; three of whom responded. For the rest of the netnography, I relied on an analysis of the social interactions that occurred on the site's timeline and posts.

In locating myself in my research, I recognise that I am a young, white, female ethnographer and that this influenced my entry and reception in the DCs. My understanding of religion and spirituality has been pulled from numerous opposing forces. On my maternal side, there is a lot of interest in art and Eastern philosophy. My maternal grandmother was raised Christian but spent a fair amount of time after retirement exploring Eastern philosophy, spirituality and transcendental meditation in India. I remember flipping through the pictures on her countless Eastern Philosophy books and examining the resplendent images of Hindu deities. Towards the end of her life, she returned to the comforts of Christianity. She died in 2018 at the age of 92, with Desmond Tutu's biography on her bedside table. Her death was an important event in narrowing down my research topic. Having this background, I related strongly to the attendees at the Kenilworth DC (see Chapter 2), in the sense that the space and the attendees felt familiar – the type of space my grandmother would enjoy.

The other side of my family – and their relationship to religion – helped to prepare me for the DC in Woodstock (see Chapter 3). My father was raised in an atheist home. Besides my father,

who converted to Christianity after the Angolan War, my extended family paid little to no attention to religion – organised or otherwise. Science, Richard Dawkins<sup>15</sup> and Stephen Fry<sup>16</sup> were often quoted and debated over our Christmas dinner.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I ensured that all my research was ethically sound and done in accordance with both the American Anthropological Association (2012) and Anthropology Southern Africa (n.d.) ethical guidelines. To protect the privacy of my interlocutors, I anonymised all names and all overtly identifiable information in writing up my data (American Anthropological Association, 2012; Anthropology Southern Africa, n.d.). Full anonymity was, however, not possible because in writing about the Dharma centre in Kenilworth for instance, some of my information came from their website, which I referenced in my ethnography. Also, with only four DCs in the Western Cape, it was challenging to anonymise the two on which I did research for this study. In other research situations, scholars have gone to greater length to hide the specificities of a location in order to protect people they studied in such a space, but apart from the failure of such protective measures (see van Wyk 2013: 68), I did not feel it necessary to do so in this study. My interlocutors at these DCs did not form a stable ‘community’, which made their ties to these places tenuous. However, I do show that the social structure in each DC was shaped by the work of their hosts. Although I gave them pseudonyms, they have extensive online lives and are well known in the DC community for their views and styles of holding DCs.

In order to ensure informed consent from people in my study, I asked the hosts and all attendees prior to the DC sessions if I could take notes of the session and our conversations. I also gave them the option of withdrawing or not being included in the research. None of the attendees took up this option (American Anthropological Association, 2012). However, despite asking for permission to attend a DC and introducing myself as a researcher before my first session at the Kenilworth DC, the host still felt “ambushed” by my presence. When she opened this ‘problem’ up for discussion to the group, no one objected to my presence or research. After the session, I went up to her and again explained that my intention was to be involved in the DC sessions and to look at the space and interactions in it. She agreed for me to continue my research in her DC and consented to a very productive interview. This “confusion” as the host called it, taught me

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Dawkins is widely known for his book, *The God Delusion*, which criticised creationism and intelligent design.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Fry is an English actor, author and comedian who is a self-declared atheist and humanist. Fry is also a supporter of the British Humanist Association (BHA) (Engelke, 2015).  
See Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen\\_Fry#Views\\_on\\_religion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Fry#Views_on_religion)

that informed consent was always negotiated and situational and that it did not end at a written agreement.

With my research on the DC South Africa Facebook group, I faced an ethical challenge in terms of user permission, since I was not “friends” with anyone on the group (American Anthropological Association: 2012). In this regard, I only chose to use data from the group and profiles that was open to the public.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

My primary research question was about white people in South Africa, and the ways in which they spoke about death and dying. Given the rise of a relatively recent “death positive” (Booth, 2019) movement, exemplified by the DC, were white South Africans’ stereotypically ‘traditional’ taboos regarding death changing? I tackled this question by looking at three DC spaces; each chapter ethnographically accounting for one space:

Chapter two centred on the DC in Kenilworth. It deals with the Neo-Ageist religiosity of the core group of Dharma attendees, who rejected their typically Western and Christian upbringings for more self-authorising spiritualities. The chapter describes the core and peripheral attendees, and how they undertook “journeys” to arrive at the DC. These “journeys” often involved individualised consumptive practices such as drug-taking and hypnosis as members reckoned with their mortality. Due to the self-authoring nature of their paths, the Kenilworth DC was not a “pure” Buddhist path but saw rather eclectic ways in which participants used elements from different traditions and religions as they grappled with death and mortality – typical of wider New Age discourse and practice. Not only was Neo-Agism a salient theme of the Kenilworth DC’s conversations about death, but it also informed how individual attendees made sense of a “good death”. The core group’s individual understandings of the good death, as one that was tidy and controlled, was significantly different from peripheral attendees’ desires to make death easier for their families. I conclude this chapter by showing that the wider racial context within which the DC took place informed the comparisons that participants made to their own ‘cultural’ understandings of death.

In the third chapter, I explore the Woodstock DC. Given that several of the attendees undertook eclectic, academic and diverse vocations, the group took on a more cosmopolitan identity. I describe how the format of this DC impacted on the kind and variety of conversations that people had about death at the Woodstock DC. I also show how the host established an “immanent frame” that excluded religious and esoteric explorations of death in this space. Here, humour and jocularly served a distinctive social function to critique wider public discourse

around (white or ‘Western’) death and to distinguish participants as different from both *other* whites and the foolish dead. Despite the conscious ways in which this group set themselves apart from *other* whites, I show that they still uncomfortably related to the South African racial context and that generational fissures, and the transience of most participants undermined the formation of a lasting social group.

In the fourth Chapter, I look at the DC South Africa Facebook group on which I did netnographic research. Here, I describe the clear distinction between the offline and online DCs and how, like the physical DCs, I show how the moderators kept the forum open to the public, and engaged with the topic of death and dying using mediated means of communication, acting as both users and gatekeepers, and only intervening in contentious threads. I describe how the moderators and users engaged with various systems of belief, and underline how the identities within this group were not as transparent in their self-presentation strategies – given the forum. This netnography shows how the users played an integral role in the policing of the group, upholding notions of “compassion” and “empathy”. Ultimately, I conclude that the group in question formed part of a “consocial group”, where engagement was incidental and in accordance of what they shared. The forum was useful in intimate exchange about personal loss and the right-to-die with dignity, particularly in relation to the physical counterparts. As such, in accounting for the online and offline worlds of the DC, I argue how the Facebook group is more than just an alliance, but rather a space in which the more users, particularly those more recognisable, could engage within a wider death positive movement.

The final chapter concludes the thesis. It argues how each DC space, despite their distinctiveness, defies and reckons with the public discourse around death and dying, particularly in terms of whiteness. It outlines the typically Western conceptualisation in which white responses to death has been homogenised – paying particular attention to how white South Africans have supposedly followed this notion of how discussing death as ‘taboo’. Through summarising each of the three DC spaces, I situate how the format, hosts and attendees trouble this homogenisation. With reference to Nyamnjoh’s critique of a lack of emphasis on whites in South Africa, I argue against this singularity; The DC, a transgressive space, shows us that within these white circles, distinctive differences do exist. Moreover, since the conversations here were free-flowing and the attendees were wilful in their desires to attend the DC, the supposed ‘taboo’ in talking about death is not as strong as the literature suggests.

## TWO | A JOURNEY THROUGH SPACE

My research looked at two Death Cafés (DC) in Cape Town; one in Woodstock and one in Kenilworth. Although both fell under the umbrella of the international Death Café movement, adhering to a downloadable guide, the Woodstock and Kenilworth (or Dharma)<sup>17</sup> DCs were vastly different in their organisation, the social constituencies they served and the content of the conversations that took place at their meetings. In this chapter, I will focus on the Kenilworth DC as a place in which the host “held space” that resonated with a group of older people that were more spiritually kindred than those that attended the Woodstock DC.

### THE DEATH CAFÉ KENILWORTH

The Kenilworth (Dharma) DC, situated in a middle to upper middle-class area of Cape Town, took place once a month on a Saturday between 14:30 and 16:00. It was a crisp day in August 2018 when I first visited the Dharma centre where the DC was held. To my surprise, the address on their website led me to a large Victorian suburban home. Once parked, I was welcomed by a Black security guard who led me to the pedestrian gate. Flowers were in bloom and the air was clear, the lush garden was showing the first sights of spring. The door to the house was left ajar. As I walked in, a creaky wooden floor and steep staircase established the entrance hall. I peered to the left where a time-worn piano separated the anteroom and the lounge. There were two couches, an armchair and several plastic chairs surrounding a coffee table in the lounge. The lounge had an unpretentious charm – comfortable seats and cushions, colourful tapestries, an image of a Tibetan monk on the wall, giant water urns for tea and coffee, and a dining table holding crockery, cutlery, and serviettes. I later learnt that the portrait on the wall was of His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje.<sup>18</sup> Placed on the dining table was the main motif of the DC, a chocolate cake.

The host stood by the piano welcoming the guests. She had long grey hair, bunched up in a ponytail and sported a maroon pashmina and casual beige pants. She introduced herself as Sunny and offered tea, coffee and cake to attendees as they entered. I explained to her that I wanted to research the DC as a movement. She recalled receiving my email and asked me to fill in my details on the sign-up sheet. During the month, this home served as a Tibetan Buddhist centre and its attendees referred to themselves as a Buddhist group, which I named the “Dharma group”.

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<sup>17</sup> Name anonymised. Not to be confused with the Dharma Centre situated in Robertson, Western Cape.

<sup>18</sup> The head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.

According to the Dharma group's website, this centre aimed to “engender peace and happiness through fostering greater awareness of the need for compassion and understanding in all areas of human activity” (Kagyu Samye Dzong, n.d.). Activities included Buddhist teachings, *tara rokpa* therapy,<sup>19</sup> charity and meditation.

Sunny implored attendees to make themselves comfortable on the three couches and chairs as the last few people arrived. Five people squeezed onto the biggest couch by the window. I noticed a white man in a maroon Kāṣāya.<sup>20</sup> I took a slice of cake and sat in the middle of a three-seater couch, perpendicular to the big couch. The cake was store-bought and slightly too dry for my liking. Some attendees chatted amongst themselves. A few newcomers arrived alone, flipping through books or sitting quietly, waiting for the session to start. A white-haired woman in her early 70s, seated to my right, leant over and in a heavy American accent asked if this was my first time at a DC. She introduced herself as Tracey – also a first timer. She expressed her interest in “lucid dreams” and in controlling her dreams through “awareness strategies” whilst asleep. She told me about a book the Dharma group was studying, “*Being with Dying*” by Joan Halifax, that aided with death preparedness for oneself and others. Tracey would become one of my key interlocutors.

Opposite me and Tracey were a group of white, middle-class women over the age of 55. Whilst they made friendly conversation, I got the impression that they knew one another. The oldest woman in the group was seated in the corner in a comfortable armchair, snugly wrapped in a blanket. Besides a young man in his 20s who came with his mother, I was by far the youngest person there. It was just after 14:30 when Sunny sat down and finalised the attendance list. She announced that she did not expect anyone else and invited the rest of the group to find a seat around the coffee table. Most people had tea and cake in hand. Sunny welcomed everyone and informed us that we could make a voluntary donation towards the tea and cake in the metal case placed on the coffee which already had R10, R20 and R50 notes in it. Sunny pointed to another tin on top of the piano and invited us to give a separate contribution for the security guard. She sat down in her armchair and began the session by explaining that although the DC was held at a Buddhist centre, all views were welcome.

Sunny turned to me and asked that I explain my research to the group. All eyes on me, I explained that I was interested in doing research on two DCs in Cape Town and tracing the

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<sup>19</sup> A unique system of Mahayana Buddhist psychotherapy started by Akong Tulku Rinpoche. With “compassion” at its core, Tara Rokpa Therapy merges Eastern and Western techniques and has various stages. Most notably, it engages with one's full life, from age one to presently. Its methods include art therapy, Tibetan medicine like balancing the mind and body and techniques to remain present (Kagyu Somye Dzong, n.d.).

<sup>20</sup> Robe worn by fully ordained Buddhist monks.

conversations that took place in these settings. Everyone agreed that I could write down notes and anonymise identifiable information. In front of the group, Sunny expressed that she felt “ambushed” by my presence, but since the others agreed, I was welcome to stay. Sunny began the session by explaining a series of hand signals to use during the session. She lifted her right hand in a loose fist and raised her pinkie. This sign signified “the little things” like “safety and boundaries”. The ring finger signalled a commitment to “respectful discussions”. The middle finger, contrary to its typical connotation, represented “respect for others and their views”. Some attendees chuckled. The index finger relayed being “responsible for one’s own experience” in the sense that nobody was forced to share if they did not wish. The thumbs-up expressed a positive experience.

Sunny invited us to introduce ourselves and explain what brought us to the DC. One-by-one, attendees described that they were “curious” and “intrigued” about death and the DC concept, with many noting that talking about death was a good idea. Others mentioned the loss of their loved ones, hoping that the DC could “help”. A burly 60-year-old white man, Jos, said that he was grappling with his stepmother’s death. Jerome, a broad-shouldered, middle-aged white man, also voiced his curiosity about death and “advanced directives”. The old woman in the blanket, Joy, said that she was here to reduce her fear of death. An Irish woman, Hilda, said that she worked in hospice care and was a member of the Dharma group. She brought along her son, Scotty, and her friend of 15 years, Hillary. Like Joy, Sunny said that she wanted to lessen her fear of dying and divulged that she had a brother suffering from an aggressive terminal disease who was in “absolute denial” about his looming death.

After the introductions, Sunny opened the floor to a conversation about death, dying and living that lasted 90 minutes. Hilda started, saying that she had returned to the DC because she was “fascinated with the topic of death and dying”. I spoke about my grandmother’s recent death and how my family suspected that she might have choked on a prune – an emblematic way for her to die. The group laughed. Joy explained her fear of reaching the end of her life. Jerome suggested that she consider appointing a “legal curator” to help with her end of life wishes. He said that he and his wife were campaigners for the “advanced directives of the living will”,<sup>21</sup> a document that the Congress of the People (COPE) aimed to introduce as part of the “right-to-die” campaign. The conversation came to an abrupt halt whilst attendees glanced at one another, hoping for someone to break the silence. Jos eventually raised his hand and recounted the “numbness” he felt when his

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<sup>21</sup> According to the South African Medical Association, a living will is “a declaration or an advance directive which will represent a patient’s wish to refuse any medical treatment and attention in the form of being kept alive by artificial means when the patient may no longer be able to competently express a view” (Madisa, 2018).

stepmother died. This opened a long exchange about what one was “supposed to feel” and what it meant to “say the right thing” in the event of death. I spoke about feeling a similar numbness when a friend’s housemate, whom I distrusted, passed away. Hillary proclaimed that too much emotion could harm the person in the dying process. Jerome agreed, describing dying as something that occurred in “stages” and could be relieved through “advanced directives”.

Another awkward silence ensued. Colin, the Buddhist monk from Scotland, quickly stepped in, steering the conversation back to emotions, stating that “there is nothing wrong with grieving”. The Dharma group devotees sustained this conversation, discussing the “energy” that one feels in a room when someone dies. Tracey recounted one of her “past life regression sessions”, where she felt her soul lift from her body. Jerome huffed, upon which Hilda called for the need for “secular mindfulness”. Sunny chipped in that, according to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, one could recognise “the self” upon death. Tracey, resuming her story after being interrupted, recounted, “my soul left my body. I was looking at everyone around me. I saw me dead but my soul was hovering. I vividly remember going into the Bardo state.” Jerome sardonically asked whether the group was “inventing something after death”. He proposed that we return to “matters of science”, the “greater debate [of euthanasia]” and the “living will”. There was no awkward pause this time. Sunny, ruffled, interrupted Jerome, informing him that the conversation was about “feelings, rather than theory”. Scotty, speaking for the first time, remarked, “we’ve all died before this –”. A woman interrupted Scotty, discussing the “continuity of the mind” after death. Colin calmly addressed the room, acknowledging that people had different ideas about what it means to die; “it’s all just a matter of making sense of it.” To break the tension in the room, I told a story of a friend’s grandfather’s death; To celebrate the grandfather’s 90th birthday, the family took a road trip to Mozambique. Upon arrival, the grandfather died and to avoid the expense of flying his cadaver back to South Africa, the family placed his body in their trailer. Once they had crossed the border, the relieved smugglers made a pit-stop. However, upon returning to the car, the trailer was nowhere to be found. Attendees shrieked with laughter. “It sounds like a *Weekend at Bernie’s!*”,<sup>22</sup> Jos chortled before remarking, “we’re allowed to laugh at death”. Another attendee chimed that laughter was “a coping mechanism”.

Sunny then announced that we had ten minutes left to discuss any final thoughts and feelings and to round off the conversation. An attractive elderly lady discussed her Catholic faith

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<sup>22</sup> *Weekend at Bernie’s* (1989) is an American comedy film about two employees discovering that their fraudulent boss, Bernie, is dead at his Hampton’s home. To enjoy the house for the weekend, the two employees attempt to conjure the illusion that Bernie is still alive.

and her fears about her grandson’s “demonic” dreams of “red dwarves with sharp teeth”. Eyeing Colin, she asked whether she needed a priest to “exorcise the house”, or whether Colin could “cleans the space”. Sunny attempted to steer the conversation back to the continuity of the mind, but failed. The group was absorbed by this demonic tale. Colin calmly replied, “maybe you should listen to [your grandson]”. As 16:00 struck, the group was ready to disperse. An elderly lady, another member of the Dharma group who helped Sunny on this day, handed out thin booklets, entitled, “*When I go... What I would like my family and friends to do when I die*”. The booklet offered “information for those caring for a Tibetan Buddhist at the end of their life” to give to loved ones, including memorial arrangements, medical interventions, and cut-out forms to give to doctors, nurses, and undertakers. It featured a blurb from Tai Situpa,<sup>23</sup> specifying “the number one thing is that your death should not become a problem for others.” It contained a form concerning medical treatment that stated “in the event of my becoming terminally ill or where there is no imminent and reasonable chance of recovery, I request that no artificial means are used to sustain or prolong my life. Indicate yes/no”. The pamphlet echoed Jerome’s descriptions of a living will.

Once the session was over, some attendees remained and mingled amongst themselves. As I walked out, Sunny apologised for her remarks and thanked me for sharing the stories about my grandmother and the “hysterical story” about my friend’s grandfather. She explained her apprehension about researchers entering a “secure space of sharing” but said that she had a good feeling about my research and welcomed me back. I caught Jerome walking to his car and told him I was interested to hear some anecdotes about advanced directives. He gave me his details and hurried to his Mini Cooper. Later that evening, Sunny sent me a message over WhatsApp, commending my participation in the meeting and linking me to a self-compassion meditation on Youtube accompanied by text (see Figure 2):

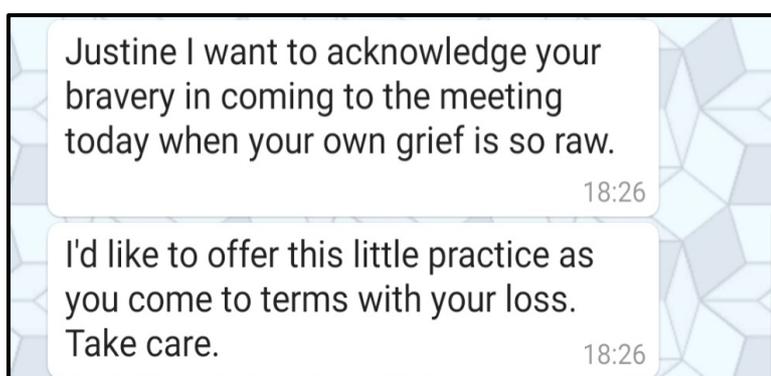


Figure 2: Whatsapp from Sunny after the Kenilworth session (11 August 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Literal translation: Great Preceptor. One of the highest-ranking lamas in the Karma Kagyu lineage.

## SITUATING THE DHARMA DEATH CAFÉS

Founded in early 2018, the Kenilworth DC took place once a month at the Dharma centre. It adhered to a “café model” format, a flexible group format where a facilitator was present throughout (Death Café, 2018: 6). Most of the Kenilworth DC attendees lived in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town, lying southeast of Table Mountain and including Rondebosch, Claremont, Wynberg and Constantia. During apartheid, Kenilworth was a predominantly “whites only” area. In 1993, during South Africa’s transition into democracy, Kenilworth made headlines when the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA) opened fire on congregants at St James Church, killing eleven people (Faber, 2018; South African History Online, n.d.). After apartheid, Kenilworth was marked as a divided suburb with affluent mansions and prolific street prostitution (Hassen, 2017). The neighbourhood has numerous commercial establishments, including the equine racecourse (conspicuously known for its annual, elite J&B Met event), business parks, and health-care facilities including hospitals, hospices and rehabilitation centres. Within a 2km radius of the Dharma centre was St Luke’s hospice, where a few Dharma attendees volunteered.

### ▪ SITUATING ATTENDEES

Demographically speaking, it was clear upon entering the Kenilworth DC that many of the attendees were over the age of 55, that most were female, white, middle-class and generally lived in the Southern Suburbs. They all spoke English. Introductions at the Kenilworth DC meetings revealed that many of the attendees were involved in nursing and hospice care. Given the attendees' occupations, it was not surprising that the group often spoke about terminal illness and care for the dying. During the sessions, there was a distinction between the core group of Dharma attendees and those peripheral to the Dharma group. Those not part of the Dharma group were usually newcomers, visitors that accompanied other attendees to the meeting, curious people, or students who saw advertisements online, and other DC attendees who stayed in the area. At my first meeting at the Kenilworth DC, Tracey, Scotty, Jerome, and Jos formed part of these newcomers. Visitors often remarked that they came to the meeting because they were curious about death, or because they had suffered a loss with which they were trying to come to terms with.

I encountered several “groupies” (as Sunny described them in a separate interview) who have attended four or more DCs around the Western Cape, among them were Jos and Nico (see Chapter 3). Their attendance varied between DCs in Kenilworth, Woodstock, Glencairn (or “Deep South”), or Napier. I initially saw Jos during my pilot study at the Woodstock DC, and then on one occasion at the Kenilworth one. He told me that he decided to go to the Dharma group’s DC

since he lived close by. He became an enthusiastic participant in the Kenilworth and Woodstock DC sessions, recounting elaborate stories about death and discussing his strained relationship with his stepmother. Throughout my research, Jos returned to the Woodstock sessions often. Like many other first-time visitors that I met at the DC, I never saw Jerome and Tracey at DCs again but interviewed them separately after the session. I interviewed Tracey in her flat in Seapoint over a falafel salad and bought Jerome a hazelnut coffee at a café not far from Tracey's home.

#### ▪ SITUATING THE DHARMA GROUP

Eight of the 19 people at this DC session belonged to the Dharma group. This core group of attendees, including Tracey, Sunny, Hilda and Joy, were familiar with one another through their monthly attendance at Tibetan Buddhist meetings and took part in Buddhist teachings, discussions, and meditations at the centre. Colin, the monk, attended this session as he was touring around South Africa, undertaking symposiums with Buddhist centres around the country.

The Buddhist character of this DC would have been surprising 20 years ago, as Tracey acknowledged in an interview. The Dharma centre was one of many Buddhist centres throughout sub-Saharan Africa and started in the 1970s under the “spiritual guidance” of Dr Akong Tulku Rinpoche. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was an influx of Chinese immigrants entering South Africa as contract minors during the gold rush (Park, 2009). Although these immigrant communities brought the Buddhist faith into South Africa, Buddhism spread beyond these communities through the work of spiritual masters, most whom were European and white. Clasquin (2004) traced the biography of one such a master called Louis van Loon (a Dutch expatriate in South Africa), who travelled East and returned to South Africa. In 1970, he bought a piece of land in Ixopo, Kwa-Zulu Natal to establish one of the first Buddhist retreat centres, which opened its doors in 1980. Clasquin (2004: 12) posited that there was no single form of purist Buddhism in South Africa. Instead, the methods of practice were influenced by an eclectic mix of origins and belief. He characterised Buddhism in South Africa as having a largely “white, middle-class following” (Clasquin, 2004: 12). Although predominantly focused on Tibetan Buddhist wisdom around death preparedness, the Dharma centre's website outlined the interfaith character of their teachings and practices, which were inclusive of Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and African traditional insights. However, despite the Dharma centre's ethos of encompassing a medley of beliefs, its members were predominately white, middle-class women.

In many respects, the Dharma group formed part of what Teppo (2011) argued was a process of cultural globalisation and transformation in post-apartheid South Africa, especially noticeable in Cape Town. She traced how churches had become gradually racially and culturally

mixed, while white interest increased in transcendent forms of religion from the East, alongside traditional South African practice. Using Foucault's "heterotopic space", Teppo (2011: 226; 235) argued that this shift represented a "counter-discourse" to the hegemonic Christian origins and institutions that had shaped many white lives. As part of this religious transformation, the Dharma attendees shared their resistance against their white and Christian origins in pursuit of progressive, synthesised and/or Buddhist practices.

Several Dharma attendees explained that they had turned to Buddhist practice to resist their institutional Christian backgrounds. Given their rejection of religious authorities, they constructed a dominant Buddhist narrative during the Kenilworth DC sessions, tackling themes such as the afterlife and immateriality distinct from what Tracey called "heaven and hell and crucifixion". It was these members who steered conversations at the DC to Buddhist themes such as reincarnation and how having a peaceful death allowed for "good karma"<sup>24</sup> in the next life. Sunny shared this belief, remarking several times about the necessity of death-acceptance.

#### ▪ "DEATH-PREPAREDNESS": SITUATING THE DEATH CAFÉ HOST

Sunny, the host, was in her mid-60s and a pivotal member of the Dharma group. In an interview after the first session, she explained that she had been around death and dying for most of her adult life. Sunny's first experience with death was in the 1980s when she worked as a transplant coordinator in a hospital, bridging the fissures between terminal patients, doctors, and bereaved families. "Usually, when a young person died, [my role] was asking if we could use their organs for transplantation... I became aware of the issues around death and the difficulties and different ways people dealt with death". When she pursued her Master's degree, Sunny decided to explore how Intensive Care Unit (ICU) nurses handled the discomfort of death in hospitals. She eventually left nursing to become a group facilitator, a lecturer at a medical university and a Reiki<sup>25</sup> Master. She later used Reiki to access the memory of her birth. When I spoke to her, Sunny ran meditation sessions, *Puja*<sup>26</sup> classes and hosted talks with monks and other prominent Buddhist teachers at the Dharma centre. Although her nursing experience was important to her understanding of her "life's journey", Sunny said that she also embraced the teachings of Tibetan Buddhist practice because its "objective [wa]s to get people to be at ease with death".

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<sup>24</sup> Karma: the sum of a person's actions in this and previous states of existence, viewed as deciding their fate in future existences. From <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>

<sup>25</sup> Reiki is a healing technique that involves healing through channeling energy by means of touch.

<sup>26</sup> A Hindu prayer ritual "for devotion, celebrating presence and memory after death" (Smithsonian Institution, 1997).

Born into a Christian family, Sunny realised that Christianity “simply did not work” for her. She ended up on “the Buddhist path” through a “long story of coincidences” that eventually led her to India. She recalled her first visit,

When I first went to Delhi, I wasn't Buddhist yet. This was ten, twelve years ago. I was traveling with a group and our train was delayed and then on the hotel floor, I saw a piece of paper with Tai Situpa's phone number. How random is that? I phoned the number ... He said, “you come here [at] three o'clock and get an audience”. I gathered people and we scuttled across Delhi in this fun taxi to find where Tai Situpa was. And we went into this compound, and I stepped through this gate, I could only think of “good and clean and fresh”<sup>27</sup>... we got up to see Tai Situpa, none of us were Buddhists, he's the highest-ranking lama in Tibetan Buddhism... and he was just chatting to us about random stuff... and I said, “can we take a photograph?” and I had a Panasonic camera, and he was so well informed, and he was going on about the [camera]. I was like “how does this little fat Tibetan dude know all this stuff?” And when we left, I felt so invincible.

Her journey from medicine to mindfulness, and from Christianity to Buddhism informed a lot of her notions and understandings of death and dying. Sunny described herself as being both knowledgeable about and being near to death and dying. Beyond her contact with death and dying in her career, she experienced the intolerable suffering of her terminally ill brother. She explained that he had written “Fuck Cancer” on his Facebook page, a sure sign that he was “running away as fast as he can”. Sunny was livid that he would not even talk to his own family about dying and I had the impression that she wanted to guide him to a more peaceful reckoning with his mortality. “It's extraordinary that death is something you have to fight”, she told me, “and if you don't, then you've lost”.

Death preparedness was a central feature in Sunny's discussions with the DC group, but she described her role at the DC as primarily having to “hold the space”. She was present throughout the entire session, seated on an armchair (the same one every meeting). She did not move from the chair, nor did she ask questions to steer the conversation in a particular direction. She did, admittedly, impose “strict” intervention when conversations became too “theoretical” or when someone tried to push an “agenda” or when they did not adhere to the formalities of the guide (Death Café, 2018). This included briefing the group before the session began, briefing the

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<sup>27</sup> The name and jingle of a South African washing powder brand.

final ten-minute announcements, and finalising the session. In spite of her role as group facilitator, Sunny was an active participant throughout the conversations.

## **RITUALS AND “HOLDING SPACE”**

The patterns of conversation and rules of engagement at the Kenilworth DC at first seemed to flow naturally from the relevant topics that participants introduced. My first experience at this DC saw the conversation traverse through our morbid fascination with death, to dialogues about what one should and should not feel when faced with death; Buddhism as a “lifestyle”, rather than a religion; and narratives about unburdening ourselves from fears of death and dying. There were three instances during our discussion when the atmosphere in the room turned awkward. The first two were occasioned when Jerome overtly dismissed Joy’s declaration that she was fearful of death and when he tried to push a discussion about a living will. This was an attempt to steer the conversation towards a “scientific” understanding of death, underscoring DignitySA’s plans for a living will, and the greater debate over euthanasia. On a third point during the conversation, it took an abrupt turn when Scotty spoke about past lives, with some attendees stifling his exploration when they tried to bring associated points across. In his case, Scotty’s self-effacing personality saw more dominant attendees eclipsing his views.

In subsequent meetings, I realised that such seemingly free-flowing conversations were patterned by Death Café rituals, its ‘rules of engagement’, by the specific interests of the people that composed meetings, and by the active intervention of its host, Sunny. Meetings were structured around the eating of cake before the meeting and greeting. The casual eating of cake, prior to the DC session, was done without any ritual marking; there was hardly any reference to the significance of the cake, and it was simply included as part of the DC process, as per the rules of the DC guideline. Yet its overarching intention to mark the community of the living reinforced the social power of community in a type of “ritualised anti-ritual” (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002: 108), similar to the secularised Eucharist in which the consumption of food served to reaffirmed social bonds rather than religious beliefs (cf. Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). Sunny’s introduction of hand signals (which none of the attendees ever used in the meetings), her opening statement about what happens at the Death Cafe, the opening of the floor, the ten-minute notice, her summing up, and of course, the mingling afterward and the leaving were patterned and predictable parts of her DC and were Buddhist in tone, evident in the Yogi-like symbols, her emphasis on “mindful” conversations, conversations about karma, past and future lives and the journey of the spirit.

Sunny was well versed in the DC tenets, and the Dharma attendees were familiar with the unspoken rules of engagement at the DC. These included the understanding that this space, despite

being a Buddhist centre, was one where all views were respected although not being a markedly therapeutic space or a symposium for “agenda-pushing” as Sunny put it. As the DC guide warned, “[s]etting too much of an agenda risks being presumptuous ... and/or disempowering” (Death Café, 2018: 5). Sunny explained that conversations that surfaced around, for instance, promoting assisted suicide, could be discussed but should not become the sole topic of a DC session. In this regard, the DC guide stated that its branches were “not an opportunity to give people information about death and dying... Rather, we create time to discuss death without expectations. For this reason, having guest speakers and information materials is actively discouraged” (Death Café, 2018: 2).

Discomfort arose in the group when Jerome “pushed [his] agenda”, steering the conversation towards a political project. When I later asked Sunny about Jerome’s unrelenting focus on the right-to-die with dignity and euthanasia, she groaned and rolled her eyes. “One can go Google it and read [about euthanasia]”, she told me, “[the DC is about] that *real* experience. That’s why we’re there”. Sunny also felt that he did not respect the Dharma group’s views on consciousness and that his insistence on “science” rather than personal stories were “ignorant and disrespectful”. Jos, in a separate interview, chuckled about that first session, claiming that Jerome “riled up a few of the ladies”.

In order to maintain “real connections”, Sunny insisted that she wanted to offer a space where thoughts could be clarified and where she could ensure that people were “hear[ing] stuff”. These “real connections”, however, did not make the DC “a bereavement support or grief counselling setting” (Death Café; 2018: 1). For this reason, Sunny wanted to ensure that people were “speaking because they want[ed] to tell someone and not because they want to be helped” or that they wanted to convince someone of their “agenda”. Sunny clarified that her role as host included “being part of the whole conversation” and “holding the space”. To hold the space meant to uphold the DC movement’s goal to be “positive...[and] to prevent the use of this concept by those with an interest in leading people to conclusions, products or a specific course of action” (Death Café, 2018: 1).

This was not always easy. Sunny heard about the DC before the first one started in Woodstock. Before starting her own DC, she attended the Deep South DC with a friend to familiarise herself with the format. She told me that she knew of one person she worked with at the maternity ward 30 years ago who attended this Café. The Deep South DC group began in 2018 and had two hosts. Sunny told me that she did not enjoy the process at the Deep South group, because she encountered a group “rescuer”, who kept the group from discussing difficult topics. She explained,

I had someone in my group who ‘rescued’ the whole time. So you’d say “Oh, I’m upset because my granny died” and she said, “oh, I work at the hospice and a lot of people die”. And then there was another lad whose friend had committed suicide and she said, “well, lots of young people commit suicide”. No. For me, that’s why I am quite strong on the rules. It’s not the point. It’s disrespectful.

She compared this experience at Deep South to her Dharma sessions, where conversations were “reverent” and had elements of “black humour”, which she enjoyed. Since Sunny already discussed death quite often in her role as an ICU nurse, as well as a member of the Dharma Centre, she thought that she could facilitate a DC in her own space at the Dharma centre. She was guaranteed consistent attendance due to her various connections to the Dharma group and their endeavours to explore the physical and metaphysical conceptualisations and understandings of death, dying, “passing” and living. Sunny said that she would continue to host the Kenilworth DC, “so long as it fulfills a need”.

## **JOURNEYS TO THE DEATH CAFÉ**

Two people who had attended the Kenilworth DC were critical of it. One critic was Tracey, a Dharma member, and another, Jerome, who had only attended that one session. Tracey, a 70-odd-year-old Jazz enthusiast, blogger, and sports fanatic has always been interested in the exploration of her “own consciousness”. Two of her undertakings included lucid dreaming, “a preparation for dying”, and Past Life Regression (PLR) hypnosis. She explained PLR as a hypnotic technique that involved a deep investigation into “one’s past soul journeys”. Under hypnosis, she watched her “soul journey” as an African slave. When her slave-self died, she was surrounded by family and her “master” (Tracey said that they had shared a “loving relationship”). Tracey described watching herself hovering over her body at the moment of death. When she later visited Botswana, she felt a “Déjà vu”, like she had arrived home. She expressed her “armchair interest” in Ayahuasca, a psychoactive brew, which stores Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) that mimics a hormone one releases during birth and death, she explained. Her membership at the Dharma centre was telling of her curiosity in death and dying. As Tracey admitted, the actual make-up of the group was not as diverse as she would have liked and some people dominated the discussion, which hindered the variation of the conversation, and the possibility that her questions about death could be satisfied. As she said,

[I came] out of curiosity. I'm always curious and questioning ... I'm a novice, really ... I'm not sure the DC can really answer the curiosities I have compared to what the other, more focussed groups are doing ... I guess it depends on the wisdom of the group and the individuals in the group and what they bring to the discussion. It could be really flat and superficial. The only issue I have with something like the DC is that when you have a large group like that, one or two people tend to stand out and dominate and I'm not sure if that's what I would consider a discussion ... that doesn't address people's curiosities.

Jerome also commented on the “artificiality” of the Kenilworth DCs. During one of our interviews, he told me it was,

a little bit superficial. Whether I'll go back again I don't know. But to me, this is part of my own journey and search, which has led me down a path I would never have thought of. It appeared to be brushing the surface... there was a lot of angst and fear by many of the people that were present there ... You can't blame the organisation or the person that's organising it. To a large extent, it depends on who attends. I superficially looked at [Sunny's] pamphlet that she distributed and there did seem to be decent sort of advice.

Jerome felt stifled by the fact that many of the other attendees were unreceptive to his remarks about advanced directives. He felt that some attendees harboured a lot of “angst” and “haven't reconciled” to the fact that they might need to make these end of life decisions. Like Tracey, Jerome described himself as a keen explorer of his own consciousness, “truth” and “death”. During our interviews, he told me that he was undertaking a hospice course and hoped to one day “hold space” in the rooms of those dying. A self-professed “psychonaut”, he was interested in “death *doulas*”, or death midwives, and soul “journeying”.

Jerome described how he had embarked on a “deep” journey at the Healing House's “mushroom ceremonies” in Somerset West. Notorious for its use of “hero doses” of psilocybin mushrooms (cf. Anon, 2015), the Healing House helped Jerome to explore his consciousness at a time when he was “a pretty broken person”. He “suffered from depression for about ten years... was an alcoholic and smoked far too much weed.” But after “that one trip, the first trip” on mushrooms, Jerome realised a couple of weeks later that he had not had a drink and that his

depression had lifted. Amongst his other journeys was one in which he consumed Mexican frog glands<sup>28</sup> that showed him “the other side”.

Through his journey to self-awareness, Jerome also started looking at the issue of assisted suicide and the prospect of a living will. This was prompted by his father-in-law’s death and the drawn-out suffering he endured before he eventually died of lung cancer. Jerome’s whole family was present when his father-in-law eventually died. He described the experience as “a beautiful thing to actually be part of ... it seemed to build up to this crescendo and suddenly the room was just filled with this light of warmth”. He believed that the right to life was underpinned in the constitution and by proxy, so should the right to a dignified death. Jerome and his wife were involved in DignitySA, and with the introduction of a private member’s draft bill to “ensure that the wishes of terminally ill patients to have medical treatment withheld are recognised by law” (Madisa, 2018). His wife was a member of parliament, representing the political party, COPE.

Tracey and Jerome denounced the Kenilworth DC’s lack of racial diversity and for not embracing new and compelling insights into what it felt like to die. Jerome expected in-depth discussions of potential policy changes at a broader level and Tracey believed discussion was hindered by the DC’s format. Both complained that conversations were mainly limited to Buddhist sentiments about death. However, upon inspection, their objections were about the specific unwillingness of the group to participate in *their* individual “journeys” and understandings of what the DC was or should be about. In many respects, Tracey and Jerome’s soul- and consciousness “journeys” paralleled themes within the Neo-Ageist movement that Pels (1998) demonstrated. Pels (1998) argued that the rejection and scepticism of mainstream religion in the West formed part of a new phenomenon; the rise of a transformed “religion” of Neo-Ageism that was a mix of traditions based on the consumption of popular beliefs and “self-spirituality” (cf. Steyn, 1994). Self-spirituality, the quest for “centeredness” and the “truth” of what happens after death, was intimately tied to satisfying consumer desires, often driven by popular culture, and/or alternative practice and, in many cases, bought with a hefty price-tag (Pels, 1998: 266). Although Tracey described herself as a Buddhist, a lot of what surrounded her in her home came from various origins, like a Kokopelli<sup>29</sup> sculpture. This Native American figure hung on her wall (see Figure 3) next to other representations of deities and spirits from across the world. In many respects, her

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<sup>28</sup> 5-methoxy-N, N-dimethyltryptamine (5-MeO-DMT) is found in a variety of plant and animal species, including the Colorado River Frog. It is said that 5-MeO-DMT aids in anxiety alleviation, helps Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and facilitates a general satisfaction for life. Most notably, DMT is said to contain mystical qualities, where users have reported “seeing God” or “the other side” (Carpenter, 2020)

<sup>29</sup> Native American deity. Kokopelli represents fertility and protection over childbirth and agriculture. Kokopelli also embodies a “trickster” energy.

religious beliefs looked a lot like Pels's (1998: 264) Neo-Ageists who de-traditionalised religious elements in service of the power of "self".

Tracey's life experience coupled with objects surrounding her were telling of the *lingua franca* of the New Age; a consumption of objects and an embrace of multiple "spiritualities" over what she felt was the strictures of "religion". Both Jerome and Tracey's journeys evinced this consumer-driven self-spiritualisation. Both invested in courses and psychoactive substances that would help them make sense of life and the cosmos, alleviate their anxieties surrounding death, and of course, experience what it feels like to die. Their autonomous and personal quests of self-exploration, which were about unique "journeys", filtered into their critiques of the DC sessions. Both wanted other DC participants to join in their personal journeys and were frustrated when other attendees were not persuaded. However, this was not just about frustrated self-spiritualised expectations of a group; the reception of their anecdotes during DC sessions were dependent on the personality, intentions and life "journeys" of the other attendees.

## PERSONALITY

Jerome's insistence on the right-to-die with dignity was not particularly crowd-pleasing at the Kenilworth DC. My conversation with Sunny led me to believe that discussions on the topics of euthanasia would detract from "the personality of the conversation" and that future talk about it would be similarly curtailed. I was surprised then, when in Jerome's absence at another session at the DC, attendees were more receptive to deliberating the topic of euthanasia. William, a soft-spoken man in his late 30s introduced himself as an ex-addict. Later in the discussion, he asked the group, "what's your opinion on euthanasia and doctors giving morphine [to people suffering from terminal illness]?" He spoke at length about how a doctor "helped" someone he knew "along". Hilda responded that her cousin underwent assisted suicide in California – she "chose the date and said her goodbyes". Another woman referenced the Sean Davison case (see Chapter 1), which brought the greater debate of assisted dying to the "public". The conversation turned to high rates of suicides in the medical profession before Sunny mentioned the tragic suicide of cardiologist, Professor Bongani Mayosi (Offord, 2018). The group sighed – this was a recent wound as the professor had died a matter of days prior to our session. A woman from the Dharma group continued, "many people in this country want to end their lives because of financial reasons". The conversation traversed into depression, suicide and whether or not severe mental illness was a good enough reason to euthanise those suffering from it; what William termed the "slippery slope" argument. One man declared his stance, "I am for it, if we consider the state that the person is in". Another probed, "how can you ask the person if they can't speak?" Noel, a

Coloured theology student in his mid-20s, a first-timer at this DC, stated that we needed “to think about the people that they leave behind.”

Without Sunny’s intervention, the enthused parties deliberated their support and apprehensions about euthanasia. Keen opinions and personal tales resounded; a situation vastly different from Jerome’s attempt to discuss the living will. However, whilst Jerome encountered much resistance to his efforts to conjure “the greater debate”, the group was more amenable to William’s soft-spoken demeanour and tentative questioning. This seemed to be a general pattern; “over-theorising” and “political agendas” were thought to detract from the “real connection” between participants, whereas cautious questioning, and discussions of emotional and personal experiences were well received.

In the group’s unspoken rules of engagement with a discussion topic, other unspoken personality ideals were also expressed. Firstly, the discussant should respect the experiences and beliefs of others in the group. Jerome did not do so when he suggested a “more scientific” dialogue. His vehement declarations and dismissal of Buddhist beliefs were eventually suppressed. The second ideal was that participants should embrace a personal quest to become more “mindful” of their own and the group’s experiences of death. To be mindful was to be aware of the “feelings” of oneself and of others. In other words, to engage with mortality without “pushing agendas” or “getting over-theoretical”. The group was more receptive to women, especially older ones who expressed their own intimate narratives. Similarly, those attendees who were more calm, quiet and vulnerable, like Colin and William, were met with a more compassionate and amenable crowd. Over some time, conversation “dominators” were hushed to open up the floor to the more unassuming attendees.

Since the DC was hosted at a Buddhist centre, Sunny and the Dharma members tried to uphold a “level of sacredness”. Sunny explained that their continuing discussion of the mind, body, and soul’s transcendence in death represented the sacredness of death itself. She tried to mediate a discussion that would lead to this “mindful” conversation with her hand signals. Although not directly linked to Buddhism, these signals held some correlations to Buddhist mudra symbols.<sup>30</sup> For Sunny, employing Yogi-like signals was, as she explained, beneficial for her own flexibility of mind and body. Sunny made up and used these signals for previous group facilitation she had undertaken at *Girls Matter*, a Kenyan women’s empowerment program. She told me that she used these signals to govern the group, yet DC attendees, like Jos, were unsure whose duty it

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<sup>30</sup> Mudra hand signals included the *Vitarka Mudra* (circling the thumb and the index finger with an open palm), which represents intellectual discussion and debate, and the *Abhaya Mudra* (an open palm), which represents protection and no fear (Tchi, 2019; Carver, 2016).

was to employ them. Although perhaps superfluous in policing the group, the introduction of these signals did contribute to enacting a more Buddhist and “spiritualist” element into the circle.

## RACE, COMPENSATION AND ‘PASSING’ THROUGH SPACE

In all the time that I attended meetings at the Kenilworth DC, only one Black person, Thabang, one Indian person, Thiresan, and one Coloured person, Noel, attended – all of whom attended the same session that William attended. Both Thabang and Noel said that they came to the Kenilworth DC because they were doing a theology project to understand Buddhism. Neither returned. Thabang, speaking softly, described growing up in a Zulu family in Durban. He remarked how “traumatised” he was when he found out, much later in life, that his uncle had died when he was five years old. Thabang’s parents did not discuss his uncle’s death because they felt that he was too young to know the truth. Fascinated, the Kenilworth DC attendees probed Thabang – a lively and prolonged conversation ensued.

After Thabang’s story, a male attendee remarked that “Sowetans”<sup>31</sup> treated funerals like a “Hollywood extravaganza”, where it was “all about social status”. A white, middle-aged woman, Pamela, said that “African funerals” were not only about the person who died but rather about “accommodating everyone”. She then described the “after tears” where people consumed alcohol after the funeral. William, glancing at Thabang, attempted to round up the conversation, which was veering dangerously close to quite essentialist notions of Black funerals, by stating that the actual funeral practice did not matter, rather, funerals were a means to “make us feel better [about death]”. Noel interrupted, “it’s better if we [celebrated the dead] while they’re alive”. William chipped in, “it’s about dealing”; that our funerals, rituals and traditions around death, were means to “bargain” with death and “make us feel better”. The conversation began to circle around larger social traditions around death and how these contrasted with the privacy and “sacredness” of grief and mourning. Eyeing Thabang, Hilda interjected, “you can’t change tradition. A funeral should be honoured in that it is part of culture”. Sunny interposed, stating that in the “African culture” the death of an old person was a huge celebration since “they have completed their journey” and made “an accomplishment in terms of living”. William asked why African people spent so much on funeral cover when the insurers only pay when people died. Thabang answered, “It’s not for personal gain, it’s for the deceased. It’s *her* R2 million. Let’s blow it on her. It’s her party”. A Dharma member added that when she was living in Zambia, the communities would “pile up their

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<sup>31</sup> Soweto is a historically black township in Johannesburg. Its name is abbreviated from South Western Townships. Soweto reached world recognition on 16 June 1976 during the Soweto Uprising, when school children protested the enforcement of Afrikaans-only education (Willis, 2019)

money for funerals". Joy, diplomatically informed the group that, "Funerals honour the dead and one must honour culture". While the group regularly interrupted one another in the discussion, no one did so when Thabang spoke.

Albeit careful about the ways in which they spoke about Black South Africans in public by not using racial slurs or crude stereotypes (cf. Sharp & Vally, 2009), this conversation about Black South Africans revealed a few deep-seated assumptions and prejudices. Many of the discussants assumed that Black people mourned as undifferentiated "communities" and that their funerary expenses were ostentatious and economically irrational. The group did not engage with Thabang's assertion that funeral money was raised by the dead person for their own funeral and thus the family had no claim on it. Thabang subtly attempted to explain that Black funerals were not about social status, as presumed by the DC attendees, but about the deceased themselves. This notion was lost on the group and did not seem to change the presumption of irrational spending. These conversations, and those similar in other sessions, offered an insight into how the (white) attendees understood Black peoples' funerary customs; guided by external forces like "status" and "money" rather than individual choice. This subtle criticism of Black people not having much choice in the matter of their funerals, as de-individualised celebrants of custom, implicated the attendees to imagine "African" cultures as an "eponymous or totemic connotation of community" (Wilmsen, Dubow & Sharp, 1994: 351). Moreover, the depiction of Black South Africans as irrational consumers has a long history in South Africa (see van Wyk, 2019: 116) and stood central to how apartheid segregation was framed (Posel, 2019). While the group's discussion of "Black funerals" were shaped by wider racial patterns of engagement and histories in South Africa, there was one point on which older women attendees identified with Black experiences of death; they respected the idea of death as the completion of a life journey that was underpinned by a contrasting type of death planning, as Thabang described in terms of funerary saving.

During my interview with Tracey in her cosy ground-floor apartment, we explored the race question at the Kenilworth DC. Her apartment was ornamented with several African sculptures, afro-political books, and resplendent tapestries and paintings on the walls. She complained about the lack of "South African representation" at the DC and Cape Town as a whole. Because of her deep connection to Africa through her past life, Tracey felt an absence of a representative population during the sessions. She wondered whether a Johannesburg DC, a more "cosmopolitan" space, would offer more racial inclusion. The Kenilworth DC was an exception to the imagined "rainbow nation" of South Africa, and she complained that,

Anything that happens in the Southern suburbs, you're not going to find much inclusion. It's the demography of the old apartheid system. You're going to have to go out to these separate communities ... it could be the African communities and these Christian gospelly people that may not be as open-minded if they're fundamentally Christian and everything is God's way. The same thing with Muslims ... it's going to be difficult [to get a South African cross-section in a Death Café], unless you have an educated group in Johannesburg. [It's] cosmopolitan, probably has more people of colour there.

Attendance at the Buddhist centre, she said, was no better because it was “mostly Caucasians, many Jewish backgrounds ... there might be an Indian [person].” For Tracey, the spatial and racial legacy of apartheid hindered a racially and culturally diverse environment at the DC and in Kenilworth more broadly. Diversity was important to Tracey because “when you die, you're dead but there is a cultural aspect to passing, as it conveys a transition. With passing, you're transitioning to another altered state and in some cultures, some Coloured and African communities, they prefer the concept of passing. ‘Dead’ is too finite”. There was something to be learnt from these traditions. Tracey believed in a new, and altered state after death, and felt that the “standardised” insights from DC attendees at Kenilworth limited the conversation and failed to account for the various *other* voices that could offer opportunities for intellectualising the topic of death.

Despite Tracey's concerns, the lack of racial diversity in the DC was not commented on during the sessions, nor in my other interviews. However, during the sessions, cultural experiences *other* than the typically white, Christian (and Buddhist) ones were paid a great amount of attention. Many of the Dharma members were well versed in cultural displays and traditions of bereavement, particularly of Hindu funerals and *antyeesti* (public cremation) largely because of their exposure to religions of the East (see Clasquin, 2004). Hilda believed that there was “wisdom in these [various] practices” and that seeing a Christian burial in Zululand and witnessing the filling up of the hole in the ground, offered her “closure”. But while attendees were interested in *other* deaths, the only exploration of (South African) Black funerals was during that one session with the theology students.

## THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The Buddhist influence on the Kenilworth DC also saw a more pronounced tendency to discuss animal deaths and the connections between humans and animals. In my interview with Tracey,

she discussed her “soul journey” from past lives and her hopes for future ones – she hoped to become a male veterinarian that would take care of animals. She loved animals and expressed this by pointing to a painting on her wall depicting a stairway to heaven with dogs on the rungs (see Figure 3). Nevertheless, this painting depicted “heaven” as imagined by Christians; serene, peaceful and occupied by “man’s best friend”. She told me,

Death and dying is for everybody. It pertains to all living beings, whether you’re an animal or a human. It’s interesting the way elephants approach or deal with death. There has been a lot of research. Very similar to the human experience in the sense of empathy and their sense of emotion. There’s a whole mourning [process]. There are sounds attributed to what we would call mourning. How do we know how animals feel? I mean dogs. They feel terrible when their master dies ... But animals have death and dying symptoms and I guess that’s the attraction for humans. Maybe that’s why humans can be more interested.

Tracey understood animal mourning as an extraordinarily similar experience to that of humans. She placed no hierarchy of emotions in mourning between humans and animals, and her painting paralleled her belief of animal reincarnation. Her understanding of animal death and mourning consolidated both her Buddhist beliefs and perennial interests that she embraced in both her life and her home.

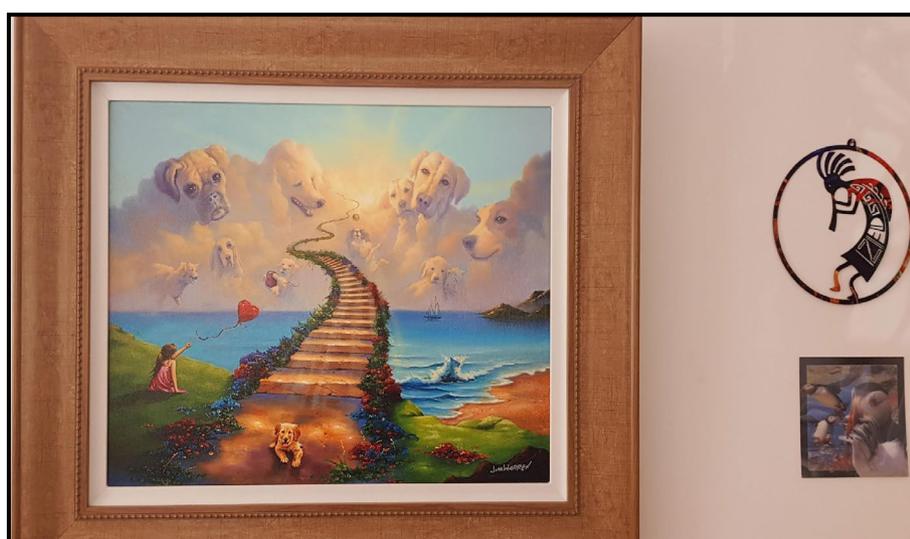


Figure 3: Dog Stairway to Heaven (left) and Kokopelli (top right). Taken by me (2018)

During the session I attended with the theology students, Noel shared his story about a beloved dog's death. He confessed that he did not cry at his grandparents' funerals but "sobbed" when his dog died. The Kenilworth DC attendees were far from shocked at his remark. Some of them chuckled in agreement, understanding how attachment to animals sometimes superseded their relationships with other people. In Noel's case, he described the death of his grandparents as inevitable and as a welcome end to lives marked by intolerable suffering. However, having raised his dog from infancy to its death was a clear reminder of Noel's own mortality in ways he said his grandparents' deaths were not.

During the same session, one of the Dharma members spoke about the solitary Oupoot, an African bush elephant in the Tsitsikamma forest whose herd was decimated due to large-scale hunting in the 1800s. Many of the attendees shook their heads, and one of the Dharma women remarked on how "shocking" hunting animals was. A younger, non-Dharma attendee mentioned that she had to go to a psychiatrist after her rats died within days of each other. Attendees then spoke about "putting down" their animals and their grief at the deaths of their companions but did not talk about whether or not animals *should* be put down. Although the group rejected hunting, most attendees agreed that they wanted to end an animal's suffering by "putting them down". They compared this to their own desires in having their affairs in order when they neared the end of life.

The above instances reveal the patterned understanding, by both Buddhists and peripheral attendees, that blurred lines separating humans and animals. Mullin (1999) traced this tendency to a trend beyond Buddhism, showing that animals, who were historically a distinct category from humans (ranging from perspectives of animals as food, bases of political organisation, and objects) gradually became incorporated as members of families in contemporary, industrial society. Mullin (1999) argued that the changing relationship between humans and animals was more telling of humans and their imposition of categories onto animals. At the Dharma DC, the "non-hierarchy of value" (Mullin, 1999: 202), which were frames as a Buddhist precept, was problematised by the moral and political concerns of ownership. In the group's discussions, they agreed that the end of life suffering of the elderly was inevitable in the natural progression of nature. And although they were generally accepting of a living will and euthanasia (depending on who introduced the topic and how), the discussions about animal euthanasia were couched in terms of moral virtue rather than that of choice.

## **CLEANING OUT THE CLOSET**

Because several Kenilworth DC attendees worked and volunteered in nursing and hospice and were older, many conversations centered on people's own, individualised deaths. A "clean",

organised death was a matter that both Dharma and non-Dharma attendees strived for. Sunny announced how, in a previous session, attendees discussed how “messy” the aftermath of death could be. During the first session, Joy expressed her fear of dying, which sparked Jerome’s suggestion to clarify her end of life wishes. At the session with the theology students, Noel told the group how his grandmother outlined very specific guidelines for her funeral. This conversation moved towards the necessity of giving instructions to loved ones prior to death. “There was wisdom in [having plans for one’s death] ... it makes it easier for the family”, Noel added. These conversations revealed a significant thread throughout the DC sessions, both in Kenilworth and Woodstock; organising one’s life prior to one's death.

In these discussions of death, the idea of “good” and “bad” deaths was of central concern (see Ariés, 1974; Emanuel & Emanuel, 1998). The first condition for a “good death” was a peaceful death. To the Dharma group, good “karmic energy” involved the process of being “mindful” in one’s death. Conversely, panic and fear at the conscious “moment” of death would result in poor karmic energy in the next life. During the time of my research, the Dharma group were studying a book by Joan Halifax, an American Zen Buddhist practitioner, entitled “*Being with Dying*”. Her book, based on Tibetan Buddhist principals, emphasised compassion for those caring for a person who was dying. As Dharma devotees, the group embraced the six Bardo “states”, which Halifax dealt with in her book. The first state, according to Tracey, dealt with daily existence and stretched from the moment of conception to one’s last breath. The second and third Bardo were meditation and dream states respectively. The fourth state was “being within the moment of death”. The fifth is the Bardo of the final “inner breath”, where luminescence and other auditory and visual phenomena occur. The sixth state, the liminal state of transmigration and becoming, occurs at the first inner breath of the new form. Here, the “karmic seeds” of the previous life manifest (Kilts, n.d). The sixth Bardo “moment” was a key topic to the Dharma members. One meditation practice that the Dharma attendees took part in outside of the DC sessions was *phowa*, a meditation practice that supposedly mimicked the sixth Bardo. In my interview with Tracey, she explained that the group was trying to understand the six Bardo states in relation to “being at ease with death”, which was why Halifax’s book was useful. She explained, “*karma* is memory ... Buddhists want to make sure you’re in a good, happy frame of mind ... [which] carries over into the next form”. That is to say that their understandings of a good death were in line with individuality, a unique experience “with the self”, as Sunny said, and one that was alone.

The Dharma members studied the six Bardo states and included this wisdom in their practice and conversations. A peaceful death, a death without fear, and an organised death, ultimately ensured an easy journey to the next life. Attendees were not concerned about whether

they wanted to die at home or in a hospital and believed that setting out wishes regarding medical intervention facilitated a peaceful death, contrary to taking loved ones by surprise with poor or little planning. To some attendees, unnatural, disorganised, or shocking deaths were thought to stifle the grieving process for loved ones.

The more peripheral attendees also expressed the hope that they or their loved ones would have a “good death” where they did not have to suffer. Moreover, they hoped that these deaths would be “natural” so that it would not cause shock, suffering, or anguish for their loved ones. Unnatural deaths included suicides and the deaths of small children. As a young female theology student said, “the smallest coffins [were] the heaviest”. Ultimately, the non-Dharma attendees reiterated a less individualised understanding of a good death, in that they spotlighted loved ones and family and believed that planning before death could ease the mourning process.

The second condition of a good death was a tidy death, where all bureaucratic obligations before death were met. In conjunction with the Dharma booklet, Sunny explained that documenting final wishes “makes it easier for the family ... death must be tidy, don’t leave a mess for others to clean up” and “sorting out” one’s life so others did not have to clear up things for those that have died. Sunny explained that although death was a “private and sacred moment”, it was essential to ensure that there were “clear instructions of what needs to be done”, something like a living will, having all affairs in order and “cleaning out the closet” before death. Whilst the peripheral attendees believed in the necessity of having definitive outlines for a funeral service to make it easier for the family, the Dharma members understood that in order to die without fear, talking, forgiving and planning one’s wishes encouraged a “clean” death. In these discussions, it was interesting how many people spoke about the horrors of cleaning out the detritus of someone’s life. All committed to have less “stuff” or to get rid of embarrassing stuff so that their loved ones did not need to deal with it.

Conversely, a “messy” death was “a bad death”. In an interview, Sunny shared a story about clearing out the home of her deceased friend’s sister, a psychiatrist. “Books forever,” she told me, “patient files. She hadn’t thrown anything away. Stuff. Expensive stuff. When she was losing her mind, she made notes of everything. It took four days of constant shredding ... My whole feeling was a feeling of revulsion”. In my interview with Tracey, she discussed her fear of having a “bad death”. As a single, elderly expatriate with no next of kin besides an elderly cousin in the USA, Tracey worried about the “legal problem [with] my next of kin ... I’d prefer [it if] ... my GP calls the shots”. To ensure that there would not be a problem around her kin, Tracey was thinking about drawing up a living will before she travelled solo to Europe, in case she was “incapacitated or on machines”. She discussed perhaps assigning the responsibility to turn off the

machines to a doctor so that there was some control over a “bad death”, which for her was having a fall, an accident or a heart attack whilst she was traveling. For Tracey, her “fear” was to be away from home, with nobody to identify her and having her body being referred to as “unknown” in a foreign country. Sunny, Tracey and several Dharma members feared that being fearful, not having affairs in order and an inability to “make peace” were detrimental to both their future soul journeys and to those around them.

## CONCLUSION

The make-up of the Kenilworth DC was informed by what many described as a dominant Buddhist narrative. The core Dharma group rejected typically Western and Christian authorities and adopted Neo-Ageist “religiousness” through a myriad of origins that shaped their understandings of death and dying, notions about soul journeys, and relationships to animals. Theirs was thus not a “pure” Buddhist practice but something that resembled the kind of Neo-Ageism that Pels (1998) described for members of society that rejected hegemonic and institutionalised religion for “self-spirituality” and that Teppo (2011: 226) talked about concerning post-apartheid whites reclaiming new identities in spaces that transgress “the boundaries of proper whiteness”. As such, individual participation and critiques of the DC were informed by this “self-authorising religion” (Pels 1998: 264) and consumptive practices that involved drug experimentation, self-help courses, hypnosis and meditation. Their individualised understandings of death also informed their desires for a peaceful death and hopes to control a “bad death” through ensuring that death was “tidy”. That being said, participants were not solely shaped by Neo-Ageism. They remained situated in a South African racial context in which the discussion of *other* deaths were constructed by older understandings of culture and ethnic groups, while their concerns about a tidy death were also centrally about wider family ties and ensuring that affairs were in order to make death easier for loved-ones.

The impact of the Dharma group on the Kenilworth DC’s “tone” was evident when we compare it to the DC I attended in Woodstock, Cape Town. In the next chapter, I will explore the Woodstock DC’s stated cosmopolitanism and celebration of immanence over religion.

## THREE | THE COMMUNITY OF THE LIVING

My experience at the Woodstock DC was vastly different from that of the Kenilworth DC, only 10 kilometers away. Hosted in a popular, quirky deli in Salt River, the Woodstock DC was held once a month either on a “Mortal Monday” or “Terminal Tuesday”.<sup>32</sup> I heard about the Woodstock DC through a relative of mine and serendipitously found an intriguing online pamphlet. The pamphlet featured a Gary Larson cartoon (see Figure 4). This amusing cartoon, I later learnt, typified much of the tone of the Woodstock DC, where people dealt with dark topics around death with humour and light-heartedness. I emailed the host, George, and asked whether I could conduct research at his Café. George agreed in a return email.

### THE DEATH CAFÉ WOODSTOCK

On 12 March 2018, I attended my first Woodstock DC at the Tea Party Deli<sup>33</sup> on the main road in Woodstock, adjacent to superettes, modern art galleries, interior design shops, and bespoke clothing outlets. The deli was home to several antique and modern trinkets, stacks of cookbooks, and uncoordinated teapots. This deli gained publicity when Michelle Obama unexpectedly showed up for lunch when their motorcade mistook the humble café for an acclaimed five-star eatery (Shapshak, 2011).

According to the pamphlet, “arrival” was at 19:20 for 19:30. I parked at the car mechanics next door and a cheerful Coloured security guard greeted me and showed me the way inside. I was one of the first people there, other than two white middle-aged ladies chatting by a window wearing vibrant wool jumpers and sheer scarves. I poured myself a glass of water, put R50 in a skull-shaped jar marked “donations” and took a cookbook off the shelf to read whilst I waited. A lively, middle-aged white man approached me from behind a counter scattered with coffee pots and introduced himself as George. He handed me a large piece of paper, titled “words, phrases, sentences related to death and dying” and said that I could start filling it out. After some pondering, I wrote down “kick the bucket”. At this point, a few other people were slowly arriving. George proposed that an attractive white woman named Claire, also a newcomer, sit next to me. He asked her to add her death phrases below mine. She wrote “pushing daisies”. A man in his 70s with long grey hair bunched in a ponytail, a plaid shirt and a snapback cap with tropical leaves, walked in

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<sup>32</sup> Mortal Monday and Terminal Tuesday were alliterations that George came up with for his Death Café. The last Facebook posting for this Death Café was in the beginning of 2018. George, the host, sent emails of these pamphlets to a database of the attendees and uploads them onto the Death Café website.

<sup>33</sup> Name anonymised.

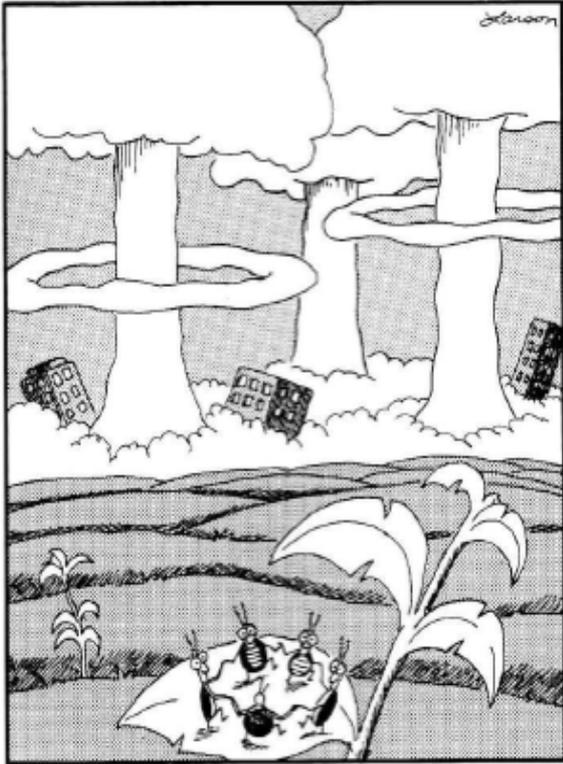
and greeted some attendees by name. He introduced himself to Claire and me as Nico, and suggested a few supplementary phrases to the list. His were effortless and comical. By the time the Woodstock DC was about to commence, our A3 page was full.

# TERMINAL TUESDAY

## Death Café

### 22 May

7:20pm - 9:30pm



Thanks Gary Larson for all the laughs.

At Death Cafés, people gather to eat delicious cake and discuss mortality as a means to making the most of life. The evening is relaxed - there are no speeches or pamphlets and the conversations are open-ended. It is not about grief or trauma, but simply a friendly space to discuss the inevitable.

Figure 4: Example of an online pamphlet. Image: Gary Larson (2018)

George began the session by lighting a candle and discussing the seating arrangements; four to six people at a table, preferably with strangers. Those sitting around our A3 page got up to move to other tables. George then launched into the history of the DC, “a social franchise” that came into being in Hackney, London, under the guidance of John Underwood. In late 2017, George and a colleague started the DC in Woodstock, and by 2018 he began hosting it solo. This was the Woodstock DC’s 17<sup>th</sup> meeting. George briefly touched on the limitations of the conversation we were about to have; attendees should try not to “over-theorise” and remember that this was an open-ended conversation and “not a grief support forum”. George stipulated that “the Death Café does not encourage any speeches, pamphlets or outcomes”. Pointing at the Guinness Cake on the counter behind him, he thanked the chef – present in the background – and asked the members what they thought the cake symbolised. No one offered an answer. George continued, the cake was “a life-giving force ... [and represented] the community of the living”. George then offered each table a “talking-spoon”, the possession of which marked an individual’s turn at speaking.

George opened the session by asking the attendees to introduce themselves in their respective groups and explain what brought them to the DC. Seated at my table were Nico, Claire, and Juliette. Nico introduced himself as a retired sailor who had spent the last three months regaining his speech after a stroke. Juliette, a 60-odd-year-old from the USA, described how she was still reeling from the death of her eight-year-old niece, many years after the fact. Claire, a 40-something journalist with a notebook in hand, told us that she intended to write a piece for the *Sunday Times*. Her article appeared in the newspaper the following week (see Chapter 1). She expressed her fascination with the idea of a DC and briefly touched on a recent loss of a friend dying in a fatal mountain climbing accident on Table Mountain. Most people in my small group stated that they were “curious” about matters of death and dying.

A brief silence followed the introductions, upon which Nico initiated the conversation in our small group. He asked the group, “if you had a choice, how would choose to die?” The table speculated that drowning was one of the more peaceful ways to go. Nico chipped in, describing his life at sea; if someone died on board, it was illegal to throw the cadaver overboard. Instead, one had to “plug up all the holes and keep it cool”, far away from the engine, until the ship reached land. Juliette seemed quite perturbed by this topic. When Nico had almost completed his monologue, Juliette spoke about the very traumatic experience of her niece’s death and her close relationship with the little girl. Everyone at the table expressed their sympathies and agreed with Claire that there was “nothing worse than the death of a child”. Trying to keep the conversation more jovial, I returned to the choice-of-death topic; my surfing friends said that the mix of

saltwater, an anti-septic, and shock made a shark bite less painful than people imagined. Nico then described his desire to sail out to sea to die, adding with a chuckle that he could not swim. Juliette scoffed and rolled her eyes dismissively at Nico. She returned to the traumatic experience of watching her niece die. We could not get a word in edgewise while she retold the story. Claire and I remained quiet after she finished but Nico described how he would prefer to save rum instead of using it as a preservative for a dead body on board. Claire and I giggled at this sailor trope. Eventually, Claire told the tale of several good friends and family members that have died – one by political assassination and her father by a fatal heart attack. I located some laughter from other tables and some contemplative dialogues at others. All the while, George was slicing the cake, setting up the teas and coffees, and walking about The Tea Party's seating area.

Forty-five minutes after George's introductions, he appeared at each table and announced a 15-minute intermission during which we could help ourselves to tea, coffee, and a delicious Guinness cake (baked by The Tea Party's well-known author and chef). Attendees mixed freely and made small talk. I met a father and daughter – Kayla (27) and Ben. Kayla was a veterinarian who said that she was “fascinated with death” and euthanasia after she saw so much of it in her practice. Ben, also “fascinated with death”, told her about the DC after seeing a leaflet. After 15 minutes, George asked that we return to our seats and continue our conversations. I was keen to move to another table since Juliette's story was getting on my nerves. Nobody else moved tables, so I settled at my original seat. In a wavering voice, Claire finally joined the conversation, telling the story of her friend's death on Table Mountain. She was barely finished before Nico started ranting about the enormous expense of “African funerals” and the “fact” that adults spent so much money on the funerals instead of paying for caregivers for “their” children. No one at the table made eye contact with him and suddenly all conversation dried up. It was obvious that he had committed a *faux pas*. Perhaps sensing the table's disapproval of his negative depiction of Black people, Nico suggested that we use the last few minutes to share humorous stories about death and dying. He spoke about having a tongue-in-cheek engraving on his headstone, although he was unsure as to what it should be. I told my Mozambican story (see Chapter 2) while Juliette, glowering, fiddled with her chunky jewellery.

George announced that there were ten minutes left of the session and told us to circle around the centre of the room and hold hands. We were told to “acknowledge” one another by making eye-contact and sharing any “last words, thoughts, feelings and gratitudes”. The flock was ebullient, with many people cracking jokes, making self-deprecating remarks, and thanking their respective tables for their discussions. One elderly woman mentioned that she did not expect to

laugh this much at the DC. George turned to Kayla, who was next to him, and asked her to blow out the candle. Mortal Monday came to an end.

## **SITUATING THE WOODSTOCK DEATH CAFÉ: RITUALS AND SALONS**

The Woodstock DC demonstrated a more structured ritual order of events than the Kenilworth DC. The meeting, greeting, and ice-breaker enabled stranger interaction from the start. George's opening primer offered a brief history, guidelines, and information on the DC, paying reference to John Underwood. Introductions at each table triggered conversations and points of deliberation. The 45-minute announcement marked the time for tea, cake, and mingling. The second half of the session offered opportunities to continue or change discussions and the final ten-minute announcement designated a moment for all attendees to hold hands, share their thoughts and connect as "the community of the living". Finally, the blowing out of the candle operated as the concluding of the DC.

As prescribed in the DC manual, the Woodstock DC adhered to the "salon model", which is when "the groups are self-facilitating. Generally, the facilitator/s would give an introduction and then drift between groups when needed. This works better for large DC's. In this case, the group size would generally be between 4 and 8 people" (Death Café, 2018: 6). The salon-style model originated in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe and first appeared in 1664 in France, eventually sprouting all over Europe (Calhoun, 2012). The salon (or English "Coffee house") functioned as a public space where bourgeois and elite publics engaged in rational, critical debate and created a new civic society (Habermas, 1962). In an interview, George told me that the salon-style encouraged people to speak openly, "the more people [seated together], the more potentially disruptive," he said. George said that larger groups meant more facilitation and explained that the small salon-style groupings within the larger group of over 20 people, facilitated "more people speaking" and more room for 'intimacy'. He believed that Kenilworth's cafe model was not as efficient because "although you witness a lot, I don't think you can go as deep ... in [our] small intimate space, where they've learnt that the people around them are trustworthy, they ... [can] tell you how it felt when their dad died [even if] they were glad".

The Woodstock DC also differed from the Kenilworth group in its demographics and tone. The Woodstock DC welcomed an eclectic crowd, although most attendees were white. Many of the attendees were professionals with tertiary degrees, like Jos who was a retired psychologist and

journalist. I also met Eileen, an “existential psychotherapist”<sup>34</sup> and Kayla, a veterinarian. There were several intellectuals and academics, like Juliette who was a Fulbright alumnus, Nico, a MENSA member, and Nikita, a young, eloquent, actress from New Delhi, doing her Ph.D. in theatre. I brushed shoulders with a few NGO workers and attendees involved in social upliftment, like Gemma, a young woman from Texas, and Louise, a middle-aged Parisian who dedicated a lot of her young life to collecting and moving cadavers to forensic laboratories after genocides. Like Claire, journalists were frequent visitors, as were young creatives who lived in the trendy neighbourhood; baristas, visual artists, graphic designers, and jewellery designers. Most notable was how the format and structure of the Woodstock DC facilitated interaction amongst strangers. Since there was no core group at Woodstock and strangers were implored to sit amongst other strangers in an intimate salon setting, this allowed for more personalised dialogues about death, dying, and living. The Woodstock DC was also more jocular and markedly secular in tone, where spiritual and religious views were not revealed at the outset, as they were in Kenilworth. As George told me, “talking about death is a tool for directional practice” and a means to “make the most of our (finite) lives” (cf. Death Café 2018).

## THE “COSMOPOLITAN COMMUNITY”

The artists and designers in the Woodstock DC often spoke about death as an inspiration in their work. One attendee, a jewellery designer named Fabien, was working on a contemporary jewellery line using old-fashioned examples of *momento mori*<sup>35</sup> from various cultures around the world. He was particularly interested in transforming human remains— such as implants left behind in the crematorium, ash, or bone- into jewellery. This was a topic that received a great amount of attention during one session at the Woodstock DC. Seated in a group in November 2018, Nico, Eileen, Fabien, and I became engrossed in a conversation about the novel idea of converting human ashes into diamonds (Hamilton, 2020) or turning the platinum from hip-replacements into fine pieces of jewellery. Eileen laughed, “my husband’s really tall so that’s good to know!” She elaborated that she could probably get a good amount of diamonds from his ashes.

Jos enjoyed listening to the myriad (mis)adventures of others and imparted his accounts during the sessions. Although he had not made any close friends at the DC, he felt that it was a good place to meet new people due to “the freedom the space affords”. Nico, a self-described

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<sup>34</sup> Existential psychotherapy, she explained, was a therapeutic technique that involves universally applicable concepts such as death, freedom and responsibility.

<sup>35</sup> *Memento Mori* (Latin translation: remember that you will die) is a symbolic reminder of the inevitability of death. See Wikipedia link: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento\\_mori#cite\\_note-oed-2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memento_mori#cite_note-oed-2).

“cynic”, shared similar sentiments. He found out about the DC through “The Mortician’s Wife”, a Facebook page by a woman who discussed her experience of being married to a mortician. Through the DC, Nico came “into contact with a lot of people”, including the Glencairn “Deep South” host. Chuckling, he admitted that one of the main reasons why he kept going back to the DC was “to meet women”. He met an American woman at the DC who comforted him after his stroke. Unfortunately, “she went back to the States and we lost contact”.

Although few other attendees admitted that they attended the Woodstock DC to meet potential love interests, the majority said that they wanted to meet people who were like-minded and imaginative, something that their attendance at the DC marked. Jos and Nico acknowledged that they had yet to make “life-long friends” at the DC but continued to attend because the “little community” allowed them to share the intimacies of life with strangers. Nikita poked fun at the DC set-up, which enforced interaction between strangers in small groups by saying that it was “speed dating for death”.

Although attendees remained relative strangers to one another, they all shared a “curiosity” about death and dying. George was quick to point out that although people discussed this curiosity with other people at the DCs, they were not supposed to be therapeutic spaces. Nevertheless, people attended them to “talk about their shit”. Jos also pointed out that the DC was not for those who had expectations to solve some deep-seated problems,

There was a youngster in her 20s. Shame, she didn’t last. She got out quickly ... I got a sense that she was in the wrong place. She was actually trying to find answers to her life issues. She said “aren’t you people terrified of death?” and we said “no”. That seemed to really puzzle and discomfort her.

As Jos insisted, to fit in socially at the DC was reliant on a person’s willingness to share their stories with others, and not to see the DC as a form of therapy or a place where one could solve life’s existential questions.

Several attendees at the Woodstock DC only attended once or twice during my fieldwork but like the Kenilworth branch, this one had a few “groupies” (see Chapter 2) who attended DCs across Cape Town, namely Jos, Nico and Dave, a friend of George’s. These “groupies” agreed that the Woodstock DC was their favourite due to the format and the mix of people. Jos complained that although the Kenilworth DC was closer to his home, its big group format was off-putting. There were international attendees aplenty, like Joanne, a 30-something woman from Ireland who told us that her local DC in Ireland did not manage to take off, but somehow “the

universe told [her] to come [to this one]”. In an interview with George, he discussed his “fucking hilarious” experience at the Napier DC. He described how “everyone knows everyone” in this small rural town and attendance primarily consisted of elderly women attendees. At the Napier DC, they joked about stockpiling drugs for a “hemlock society” that would facilitate assisted suicide with those elderly associates afflicted with aged diseases, like Alzheimer’s. As George said, “there’s a lightness to it, but they’re serious”.

In the descriptions that these Woodstock “groupies” gave of other DCs, and especially the ones on the “*platteland*” (rural areas), a very distinct in-group impression of Woodstock started to emerge. It was an impression of the Woodstock DC as part of a cosmopolitan, cultural hub where interesting, yet unconnected (younger) individuals met. Albeit an eclectic group, with varied backgrounds and vocations, it was a white cosmopolitanism, where the group were predominantly white South Africans, barring a few individuals. This sophisticated crowd was set up in opposition to the close-knit, older, slightly eccentric people who met in DCs on the *platteland*. The Napier DC was regarded as a parochial, artistic, and community-driven “pensioners vibe”, far removed from the urban bustle. The social happenings of Napier were imagined as based on mutual trust, where “people watch out for each other”, as George told me. And while different, George also described a kinship with the Napier DC attendees, a kinship he recognised in their open discussions of bizarre taboos and their baulking at local conventions.

Although the Woodstock DC seemed to be cosmopolitan in its embrace of local, rural and international Cafés and visitors from all over, there were generational tensions in the group that often surfaced in the Café conversations. During a November session in 2018, for instance, Eileen spoke about “death in corporate [business]”, like retrenchment, and the anxiety a lot of young workers faced. Fabien remarked that “millennials” faced immense struggles with depression and anxiety. Eileen, exasperated, said that she “blame[d] the fucking Dalai Lama” for millennials “feeling entitled to happiness”. She believed that modern parents coddled their children and that drugs were too flippantly used to seek relief. Nico, trying to get a word in, eventually told the table that they had the same problems back when they were growing up but that “news has changed”. He believed that anxiety was ever-increasing due to the inundation of news from multiple sources. Younger attendees noted these tensions, often refuting claims made about “millennials”, revealing the conversational fissures between the older and younger crowds.

On a short Youtube documentary, named the *Death Café* by StreetTalkSA, George and his friend, Dave, referenced these generational flare-ups, noting “how differently people think about this topic” (StreetTalkSA, 2019). Dave noted that in his middle age, he had little “experience” with death, but “when you’re 23 and think you’re invincible, you’re going to bring

a whole different perspective”. At the physical DC, older attendees believed that younger people were around death less, were anxious, indulged, self-consumed, overly medicated, and preoccupied with “image”. In our conversations at Woodstock, older people’s concerns centered on aging, care, and losing those around them while younger attendees thought that older ones were uninformed about current happenings and inflexible in their notions of society – such as Nico’s racial *faux pas*. They often asserted, like Joanne, that “people assume that the older they are, the closer they are to death, which isn’t true”. These younger attendees expressed more interest in “experiencing life”, “consciousness” and death in popular culture. Since the groups were self-facilitating, when these tensions arose, George would not intervene.

## HOSTS HAVE TASTE-BUDS

I interviewed George after I attended my first session. We met near his home in Observatory and had two follow-up interviews in person. We also connected over text. George had a BPhil degree and began his career working in special needs education. He abandoned education to run industrial theatre classes aimed at employees in large corporate or factory environments. Since the employees had trouble “feeling seen and being noticed”, these classes focused on team-building or problem-solving exercises. George’s industrial theatre classes aimed to make personal and work struggles visible amongst these employees and to highlight diversity and workplace issues. After hours, he DJ-ed at events and hosted a DC once a month. George found out about the DC through an article in *The Guardian* (UK) and thought that the idea was “pretty cool”, much like the “Ms Landmine” competition, a “beauty/humanity pageant” for people whose bodies had been marred by landmines. He told me,

if you take two things like ‘Miss’ and ‘Landmine’ and smash them together, you get people’s attention. I think that’s what the Death Café does. My ultra-conservative, *Times*-reading stepfather can’t – he can barely contain his bile that I do Death Café and that my mom comes ... talking about death is good for life and not *talking about talking about death* – because that could get quite esoteric.

Excited about the uncommon pairing of “death” and “café”, George “contacted the dude in London, Jon Underwood, who [was] the founder of the DC ... and he said [doing the café was] ‘light and lovely’, in fact, it’s so light, people are just grateful to break the taboo because no one else is doing it”. George said that many others shared his stepfather’s perception of the DC as macabre. He disagreed and explained that his most notable experience of death was so traumatic

that he struggled for years to cope with it. His major experience of death was that of his father, a man who “sucked the marrow out of life”. Struggling with heart problems, George knew that his father’s death was looming. Throughout his childhood and university, George had watched his father in agony, and eventually, about ten years ago, his father died. He struggled to cope with his grief, and it took him trying “to do this thing [the DC] to work through that for me.”

George’s past was troubled. He struggled with drug and alcohol addiction and had “lots of problems with self-worth”. During my fieldwork, George went into rehab because “things were getting ludicrous”. Whilst in rehab, George took a break from the DC for several months and considered “passing the baton” over to someone else to host. After months of no emails for the next DC event in Woodstock, and four months with no activity on the DC website, I received an email from George. He felt “much calmer and ... more present to hold the [DC] evening”. Sober since the beginning of 2019, he admitted that his “relationship with life and death” had improved, some of it due to his role at the DC.

Three months after George resurrected the Woodstock DC, we exchanged ideas over coffee in Claremont about a potential project he was thinking about undertaking. George wanted to work on teen suicide and depression after a friend’s son, who was only 15, tried to kill himself twice in December 2018. George described teen suicides in South Africa as an “epidemic”. He felt that he was able to “help young people make an impact on mental health” because of his own struggles with mental health and his work at the DC. Interestingly, he did not tell his son about the young man’s suicide attempts. When I asked why, George admitted that although he needed to speak out about suicide to dispel the stigma that surrounded it, he was also trying to honour a confidence and wanted to protect his son against “the black dog”, his metaphor for depression. It was something that brought several people to the DC,

The people who have “the black dog” come and sniff around and support each other. It’s like “how you doing?” “Well my curtains are closed, I’m not feeling like life has much purpose right now” and it’s like “no. you are loved, I love you. Let’s go for a beer.” So that’s the cake thing...that’s the community of the living... That’s why it’s such an important ritual to share cake together because the dead have no taste buds. We are alive.

Unlike many attendees who remarked that the DC was a space where “surface” social relationships were formed, George insisted that “what’s really special about these evenings is that we’ve become a community. I’ve made life-long friends that will come again and again”. George

played a very specific role in establishing a community in which people could speak freely. Towards this end of his sessions, he chose to separate couples and attendees who knew one another because,

With a stranger, you don't know if you'll see them again. Ever. And it's like when you travel alone, you are free to invent whomever the fuck you are. You can be your best self without censorship. So, when people come in, I routinely separate couples because I believe that those couples will censor themselves. Except for the one table last night, there were four or five friends... There's no point. Every time I do separate someone, it's almost like this "tearing apart" and I feel like a bit of a jerk and the person is like "oh, alright, if I must" so there's a little bit of resentment and it takes a little bit of firmness but I think it's worth it.

George enjoyed "experimenting" with his role as host at the Woodstock DC. He deemed himself a "typical Cancerian", someone who "at a party [likes] to be on the decks or behind the bar. In the middle of the room? Not so good. As host, I'm free to escape". He preferred to "hide behind a few duties"; either moving around to multiple groups or arranging the teas, coffees, and cakes in the background. George's activities included unlocking the blinds, boiling the kettle, cutting the cake, and switching off the alarm. "It saves money," he told me, something that at first cost him "about R900", a cost that was seldom covered by the donations people made. As he said, "sometimes there were 20 people and only 15 put cash in".

George emphasised that the DC was not about making money. Initially, it helped George with dealing with his own grief and "issues" but over time, he said, his work in the DC became a matter of providing a service to people that needed it. The work was "fulfilling", not necessarily because he grappled with past traumas and unanswered questions around death and dying, but because it brought people together. But, he admitted, he liked people "in small quantities". As George said, "It's luck of the draw at the DC...I love just closing my eyes and listening to people gun it... [This work] is fucking validating". Occasionally, George received emails from people who had been helped by the DC. With the sender's consent, he sent me one of these emails (Figure 5) from a grieving attendee,

I hope you are keeping well?

I am writing to tell you what a profound influence DC has had on my parents. I encouraged them strongly to attend when they were visiting us in CT. I would have gone along with them, but then something came up and I couldn't. They went never-the-less which was unusual, and my dad mentioned it often and spoke to a lot of his friends about the experience.

My dad passed away on Monday night last week from a rather unexpected heart attack at age 72. It has been a tough week for all of us, but because we all spoke about death before - and esp about what a 'good death' looks like, and to be prepared - it has been so much easier, I believe.

Thank you.  
Might there be a donation I can make towards Death Cafe to say thank you for its influential role in my dad's processing?

warm regards

*Figure 5: Feedback email sent to me from George (2019)*

But for the DC to do this valuable work, George needed to exercise control over it, especially over disruptive latecomers, people who drank alcohol, and those who wanted to distribute pamphlets. From long experience, George knew how disruptive latecomers could be to the organisation of the session. To illustrate, he told a story about a man who arrived late at one of his first DC sessions in December 2017, which he hosted with a colleague. “Now, we have to choose a table for him”, he told me, which detracted from his duties and distracted other members. “He sat down and immediately passed out on the table”; the man apparently had severe jet-lag and was narcoleptic. “For a moment, it was like performance art”. Not all disruptions were this dramatic, but George insisted that latecomers disrupted “the frame” because they missed the introductions and thus stifled full participation and “comfortability” at the DC. This was also the reason why he asked attendees to arrive at 19:20 instead of at 19:30. He stressed that, after introductions, attendees in their small groups formed a “compact” to engage one another.

George also complained that many of the latecomers had “guzzle[d] down a couple of glasses before [they arrived]”. This was against the DC rules; it was a strictly sober event. One young female attendee even dubbed it “a sobering experience” due to the lack of alcohol and the content of conversations. According to the DC guide, only tea and cake were allowed at their events because hosts had to ensure the “safety” of attendees by refusing to “admit anyone who comes to a DC intoxicated” (Death Café, 2018: 3). As the guide further explained, “the linking of death, food, and drink comes from Bernard Crettaz’s Café Mortels concept. Mr Crettaz said that ‘nothing marks a community of the living like sharing food and drink’” (Death Café, 2018: 4). Although attendees had access to the guide online, the onus was on George to stick to the guide’s stipulations at the Woodstock DC. This was not always easy. George admitted that he did not refuse access to people who smelt of alcohol but tried to ensure that no alcohol was present during the session. This was hard because people arrived with “hip-flasks and the like”. Nico, a regular

attendee, was known to arrive with a hip-flask of rum. The man, said George, would “piss off a lot of people” because the rum made him “difficult”.

As host, George enjoyed facilitating talk about death but “talking about talking about death”, his dismissive reference to metaphysical enquiries, had the potential to result in arguments. He insisted that talking about things beyond death was not, as many “philosophers” believed, breaking a taboo, nor did it fit into his goal of creating a community of intimate exchange. As he said, “it’s fine to disagree... [but] it’s completely unreasonable to know the unknowable and argue about belief”. “People find meaning where they looked for it”, he said, for instance, those strange coincidences where one may believe that a derelict steam train spontaneously started to whistle the moment a beloved grandfather died – as one young, female, Christian attendee noted. Many attendees who described themselves as non-religious admitted in the sessions that they found some type of solace in ritual. Frances, a white graphic designer sporting trendy spectacles, mentioned that she stayed in two (different) rooms in Grahamstown where the previous tenants had committed suicide. She said that although she was not religious, she had asked her Catholic housemate to bring in a priest to “cleanse the space” and burnt *mphepho* (a herb used in Xhosa ritual cleansing) because “ritual is soothing”. “I’m very unsentimental and unsuperstitious”, George told me, “I don’t believe in reincarnation, souls, dust onto dust. I’m not very interested. I try respect their point of view, but I don’t really. [It’s] a belief of nothingness”.

Akin to George, many attendees, like Gemma, Frances and Nico, did not find religion fulfilling. During our interviews, George avoided discussing matters of the mind or soul’s transcendence. While George did not declare himself a humanist, his beliefs resonated with the humanists that Engelke (2015) studied in Britain. Like them, George was “good without God” and valued reason and “immanence” above matters of transcendence and religion. Engelke (2015: 7-9) argued that secular beliefs were enmeshed with all kinds of “materialities”, rather than a discursive practice. The “immanent frame” that such secularists developed, said Engelke (2015: 6-9), depended on actions that occurred within the “here and now”; the natural, essential qualities of death and dying, the physical laws of nature and the “admi[ssion] of no beyond”.

George arranged and acknowledged that he used “trinkets” in such a way that attendees could employ and interact with them throughout the session. This emphasis on the materiality of death, or what Engelke (2015: 42) called the “heavy symbols” of death, was deliberate. George directly addressed these death motifs, albeit gimmicky, to push “cosmic concerns” out of the immanent frame, thus steering away discussions about life after death, like those at the Kenilworth DC (see Chapter 2). Juliette added that even though the talking spoon was there, “nobody ever uses it” at the DC. Despite this, these trinkets served a purpose. While attendees did not profess

their religious beliefs, they could admit that the rituals of religion “offers opportunity to be closer to the dead”, as Frances declared. George placed plastic skulls on the tables, stuck colourful paper skulls (*calaveras*) resembling the Mexican *Dia de los Muertos*<sup>36</sup> (Day of the Dead) festival on toothpicks for the cake (see Figure 6), and lit a candle to symbolise the beginning and ending of life – and the DC. The gimmick of these trinkets, George insisted, maintained a “light and lovely” atmosphere at each session in comparison to the Buddhist imagery and Yogi-like symbols so common at the Kenilworth DC. Through Mailchimp, George also sent invites that contained Gary Larson cartoons in order to add an element of humour to the DC (see Figure 4). George maintained that these cartoons and trinkets set a carefree tone at the DC to sustain more immanent conversations around death. Conversely, if he decided to use coffins, real skulls, images of heaven or Eastern themed objects, it would awaken “cosmic concerns” by the attendees.

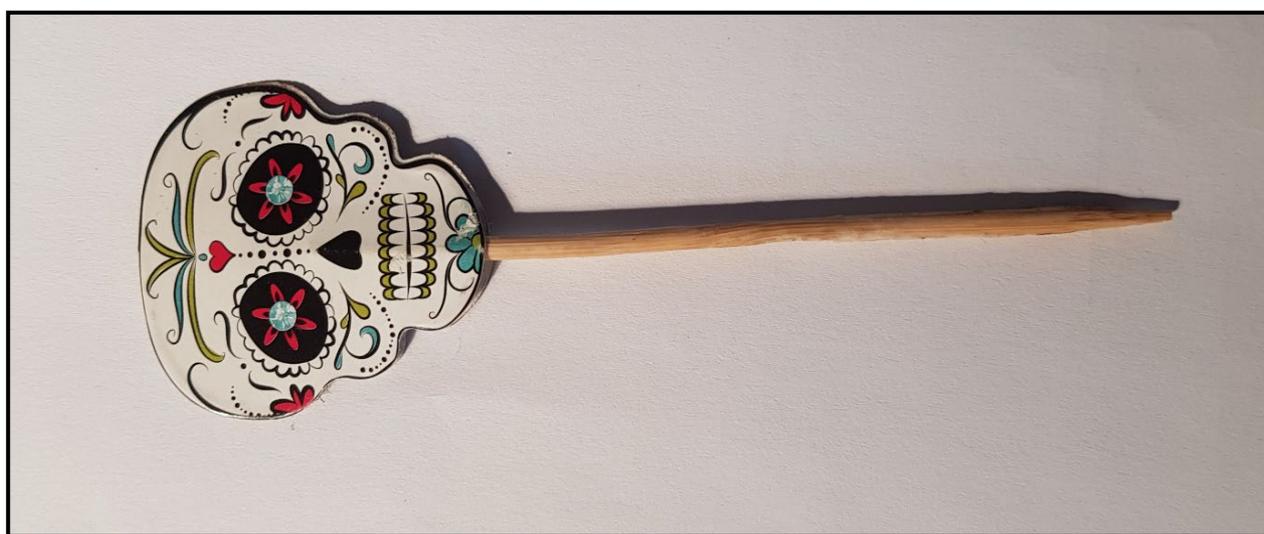


Figure 6: *Calavera on Toothpick from the Woodstock DC. Photo taken by me (2018)*

Like Sunny in Kenilworth (see Chapter 2), George struggled to keep people with “agendas” from dominating his DC. One incident stuck out in his memory: A widow and her colleagues, linked to DignitySA, came to his DC. They asked George if they could put pamphlets out because “one of the DC rules is ‘no pamphlets’”. George objected. He admitted that he “was a little bit peeved” because he does not “believe the DC is a DignitySA thing”. In protest, the DignitySA members “hijacked” the conversation at that session through discussing advanced directives and “skulked away when they saw that the DC was not for sale”.

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<sup>36</sup> *Dia de los Muertos* (1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> November) is celebrated in (mainly) Mexico. On this day, loved ones gather to celebrate those who had passed away. Distinctive markers of this day are food, altars and *calaveras* (animated skulls or candy skulls).

As host, George tried to steer clear of directing specific questions to the tables. But as he walked past now and again, he would break the rules to pose a new topic when a discussion at a table had dried up. On one occasion, he joined our table and began discussing “water burial/resummation” - where a cadaver is boiled in water and the flesh is separated from the bones. The attendees at my table listened closely but were not quite ready to get into this discussion. We continued to discuss the objects of our deceased loved ones that we held dear. Although many attendees were not comfortable with a discussion of alternative burial methods, George was fascinated by this topic and in our interviews spoke at length about this, about the “legislative nightmare” of disposing of a body in alternative ways, as well as “the great backdoor insight into the funeral industry and unregulated funeral dudes”.

### **(MIS)ADVENTURES: LAUGHING AT THE DEATH CAFÉ**

The tone and style of conversations at the Woodstock DC were dependent on the “pot-luck” and demographics of the table. Jos, a regular attendee, explained that he was first attracted to the DC because he was “curious” about death. Over time, he explained that he was “invigorated, felt alive and intellectually stimulated” after the sessions. He described it as a space where one could “discuss, listen, contribute, exchange ideas about death and by implication, about life” although “it depends on who you get”. He continued to attend sessions because he liked “hearing people think and feel” and believed that he could “tell a reasonable story”. At a small coffee shop in Claremont, he told the story of one of his late friends, a young man of 22. Jos was living with him at the time, but was away for the weekend. He described his friend as “a *parabat*,<sup>37</sup> in Angola. He’d been in situations where “he was the only *oke* [guy] arriving that wasn’t dead or wounded” – a man who was seemingly “invincible”. But the friend accidentally “electrocuted himself in the house on the kettle and died ... he disobeyed a law of nature and paid for it with his life”.

While other stories about death by electrocution were sombrely received at the Woodstock DC, people laughed at death misadventures – those deaths, often described second-hand, that contained bizarre accounts. The cartoons attached to email notifications from the Café typified the way gallows humour was included in the DC in Woodstock (see Figure 7).

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<sup>37</sup> Derived from “Parachute Battalion”. The South African army’s paratroop unit. This unit has performed many operations in battle, most controversially, in the Battle of Cassinga, Angola in 1978 (McGill Alexander, 2003).

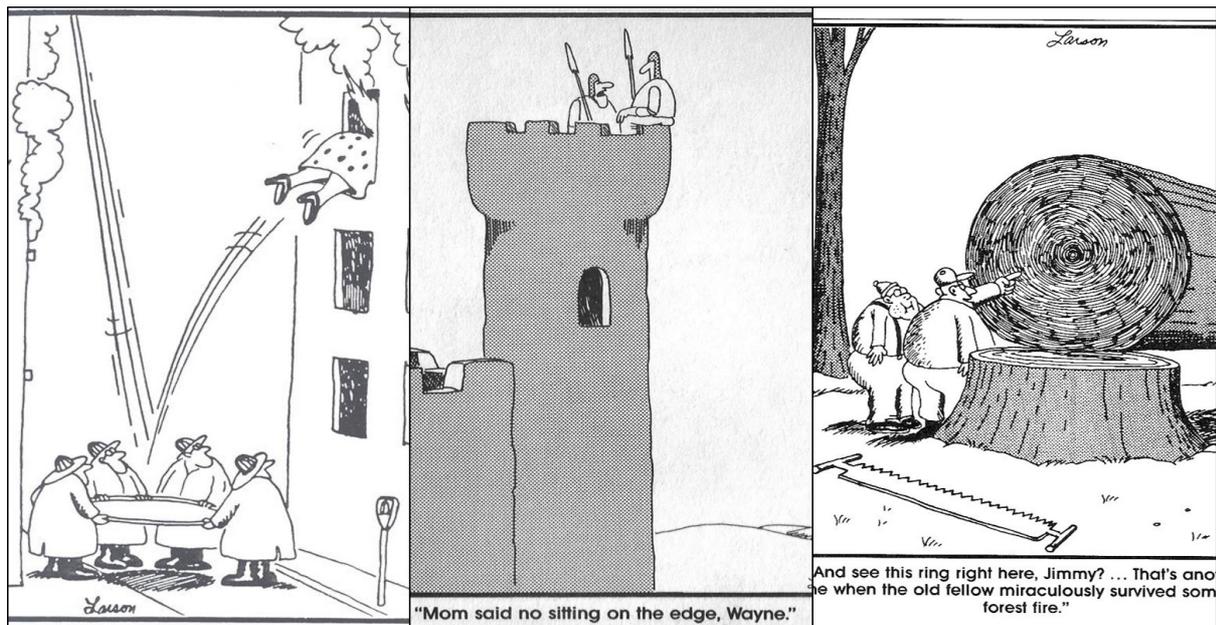


Figure 7: Gary Larson cartoons attached to DC emails (2018/2019)

Poking fun at death often happened when people wanted to lighten a particularly serious conversation. During the first session I attended at Woodstock, attendees were responsive to Nico's humorous concepts for his headstone and cackled at the thought of an elderly lady who, during the reflection at the end of the session, mentioned that she was "more open to smoking marijuana", after our session. Jokes and stories often centred on past embarrassments and the retelling of misadventures of death. During one of the sessions, a young female attendee spoke about her miscalculation of the wind when she scattered her grandmother's ashes at Hout Bay. The wind blew directly into her and her family behind her, coating them with grandmother's ashes. People laughed when I claimed that the story reminded me of an iconic scene in *The Big Lebowski*.<sup>38</sup> Some attendees told humorous stories at the expense of *others*. For instance, Nico, a strident animal-lover, recalled how his father, a self-professed dog-hater, "died chasing the dog" in a rage due to the pooch's incessant "yapping". Nico said that he did not want to die carrying the same rage as his father did. Jos told another dark anecdote about a card game,

[I heard about] a Greek man in PE [Port Elizabeth] who used to meet with some buddies for a weekly card game. There was another bloke who was using the meeting

<sup>38</sup> *The Big Lebowski* (1998) centred on the mistaken identity of "The Dude" (Jeff Bridges) who shared the same name with a millionaire. The Dude is commissioned by his namesake to secure the release of Lebowski's trophy wife, but plans go awry when Walter, The Dude's bowling buddy, intends to keep the money. The scene in question follows Walter's scattering of Donnie's ashes, who died having a heart attack during a clash between the bowlers and the "nihilists". Walter offers a eulogy to Donny, referencing the Vietnam War, and after misjudging the wind, scatters Donnie's ashes into The Dude's face.

as a cover for his affair. During the card game, [the Greek] guy got a frantic telephone call from [his friend's] mistress. The friend had died. *La mort d'amour*.<sup>39</sup> The Greek chaps went over [to the mistress's house], dressed [the dead guy], and took him to the card game – 'the man who died twice'.

Stories such as this one, as well as my Mozambican one (see Chapter 2), were common at the DC, and attendees often reacted with laughter. It was a way, said Jos, in which attendees could "laugh in the face of death". But not all attempts at humour were successful. Nico's story about ending his life by sailing into the ocean, since he could not swim, only provoked a few chuckles from Claire and me. Nico's misjudgement of both the timing and audience of the joke – at a moment where Juliette was discussing the deep trauma she experienced when her niece died – ultimately failed. Nevertheless, George remarked that he sometimes loved to close his eyes and listen to the laughter at the tables, something he stated after every session. It was a form of humour, he said, that inoculated attendees against their fears of death while "fessing up" to the reality of death and dying.

These stories revealed joking's place in the DC, and its friable nature. As Gorer (1955: 49) so eloquently described, to go against societal taboos and poke fun at what society deemed as inappropriate (like being forced to talk about death) often results in a certain type of obscene laughter, where "the taboos of seemliness have been broken". Wasserman (1999: 190) asserted that a joke or humorous anecdote derived its success from a "shared socio-cultural context of values, norms and meaning". Wassermann (1999) argued that the study of humour was a neglected field in social Anthropology, particularly due to the fluidity, subjectivity, and its culturally specific nature. She described that amongst Sepedi speakers for instance, "to cause laughter" within a group was to relay the embarrassments of *others* (Wasserman, 1999). In some regards, while the audience at the Woodstock DC did not form a tight-knit group, they shared popular cultural references that made the Larson cartoons funny, that allowed them to laugh at *The Big Lebowski* story and to appreciate Jos's ribald story, which came across as irreverent and morally risqué. As such, Foltyn (2008: 163-164) asserted that in America's "death-denying culture", popular culture turned the celebrity corpse into an infotainment commodity that people collectively and voyeuristically consumed in ways that made "death ...the new sex" (Foltyn, 2008: 153), which challenged Western cultural taboos. In many ways, this was true for the South African media infotainment industry too, as television shows about murder and death were wildly popular

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<sup>39</sup> French literal translation: "the death of love". Death occurring during sexual intercourse.

(Comaroff & Comaroff 2016: 71-100). However, in both the interviews and the DC sessions, it was clear that DC attendees did not see the increased visibility of death and dead bodies in popular culture as having a great impact on the supposed taboo of talking about death among ‘whites’.

Few studies have been done on the culturally specific humour of whites in South Africa but in studying a group of Black, Zulu-speaking choir members who joked about living with HIV, Black (2012: 88) argued that humour encouraged both “support” and reinforced community because “talking about death” broke the taboo of these discussions in their respective communities.

In talking about humour at the DC sessions, participants often used their ability to joke about death, or as Gorer (1955) said, to break social taboos about it, to differentiate themselves from outsiders who suppressed any talk about death, let alone laugh at it. As Carty and Musharbash (2008) argued, laughing and joking behaviours such as these were revelatory of the identities of those who told the joke and had a role in demarcating difference. During every session at the DC, attendees would mention that it was too “jarring”, as Joanne deemed, for their family and friends to talk about death. Moreover, death, according to those who came from Christian and Hindu backgrounds, was only discussed “with religious strings attached” or briefly touched on when the event of death happened. During introductions at the February session, Frances – seated with me and three of her friends – informed us that she “want[ed] to talk about death, but people repress[ed] it”. She added that discussing death over tea and cake was “constructive” as opposed to the hysterical unleashing of grief after drinking alcohol at community wakes. Attendance at the Woodstock DC obliged attendees to discuss death without conventional regulations that prohibited such discussions. Finally, their discussions were informed by their active choice to be there, as well as an intention to discuss death without fixating on matters that were deemed esoteric or religious.

Conversations about the DC acting to “break the taboo” were often formulated in response to any mentions in the sessions that being with death or talking about it was uncommon in “our modern society”. Nico for instance told us that in “our modern society, we are so disconnected from death because we’re not with it”. When discussing the future of the DC in an individual interview, Jos said that he expected it to grow, but that such growth would be limited in “societies where it’s very taboo to talk about death”. Jos was not specific about which societies held these taboos. At another session, Beatrix mentioned that “talking about death is not morbid. People repress [death]”. She went on to mention how open her father was about discussing death with her, upon which her friend retorted that she was “so lucky” to have such open conversations with him.

Humour during the sessions also constructed a differentiation between “us” versus the “foolish” dead. Swart (2009: 897) posited that there was also a “survivalist strain” of gallows humour in South Africa. Boer war cartoons, she argued, demarcated the living from the dead; uplifting the living as the survivors and laughing at those who suffered “foolishly”.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the images in the DC cartoons portrayed bizarre ways to die. These illustrations paralleled those many snippets of humorous narratives and acted to lighten the gravity of death itself. Although conjuring up laughter, attendees were strikingly aware that these bizarre deaths could happen to them or their loved ones. Jos’s story about his parabat friend held moral value in that he broke a “fundamental law of nature”; a foolish way to die, particularly for someone who was seemingly invincible. This type of survivalist strain was also typified by Nico’s chronicling of his father’s death. Nico admitted that he harboured no fear of death yet strived for a death (and a life) that was different from that of his father’s – one that was not imbued with irony and fury. Humour was a means to inoculate those who had survived death or who had seen loved ones die. At the DC, attendees laughed “in the face of death”, insofar as they faced death, in a real sense, in their monthly meetings.

## **YOU DON’T HAVE TO ANSWER THIS**

Compared to the Kenilworth DC, discussions at the Woodstock DC were fixed on the more mechanical and material aspects of dying and death, such as Nico’s theories of what happens to the body during a “slow death”, like dementia. As he told our table, “the body is a vacuum until dementia [happens]”. “The last to go is the sense of hearing, [finally] the ears leak ... all of these [functions] are controlled by the brain”. Although “death” was the central thread of conversation at the DCs, sometimes the conversations were prone to stray to discussions of life outside of the DC, as participants drew loose associations between topics.

The following interactions, at one of our May meetings, was typical. Gemma, an American from Texas, mentioned that her family did not honour the dead like Nikita’s family in New Delhi. Without responding to Gemma’s assumptions about her family and their death rituals, Nikita asked the table if they knew about “Yoga with Adrienne”, a popular Yogi Youtuber who had brought (Indian) yoga practice to international audiences. She remarked that “technology is connecting people”. Aware that George was about to come around and perhaps comment on their non-death discussion, Joanne attempted to bring the conversation back to death and enthusiastically talked about the “corpse pose”, the English translation of the *shavasana* in yoga. Similarly, Fabien,

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<sup>40</sup> Swart’s (2009: 898) research centred on Afrikaans humour in the aftermath of the South African war.

during the November session, revealed that he dealt with a history of self-harm through getting tattoos; “body damage to replace body damage”, he told us. Several of the younger attendees, and a few of the older attendees, also admitted that they used cannabis, for both recreational use and to aid in relieving anxiety, something many attendees admitted to suffering from.

Depression, anxiety, and suicide often lead to some uncomfortable conversations at the DC. At the May meeting, Beatrix declared that suicide was “the worst type of death”, as her mother’s multiple suicide attempts left her “waiting for tragedy”. Frances, Beatrix’s friend, responded that she had attempted suicide when she was younger. Frances insisted that her failed attempt was one of the best things that ever happened to her. “Facing death” allowed her to “confront life” and focus on resisting her habit of “normalising pain and suffering”. During the November session, Eileen said that suicide and attempted suicide was a young phenomenon that mainly happened to teenagers and young adults after “a bad break up” or because they “over-romanticise” suicide when identifying with pop stars. She implied that teenagers committed suicide because they were naïve and short-sighted. Fabien apprehensively replied, “I totally relate, [Eileen], but old people do it too”, and that “you have a right to end your life no matter how old you are.”

Whenever a person made a negative comment about suicide, anxiety, and depression in the DC sessions, like in Eileen’s comment about this being something endemic to young people, those who had attempted suicide would often confess about their attempts. This would always shut the first speaker up while the small groups would listen, fixedly. In most instances, they would ask several questions opened by a quick apology, “you don’t have to answer this, but...” For many attendees who had ingrained negative beliefs about suicide and depression, this was the first time they could confront someone who had tried to commit suicide.

Less uncomfortable were the discussions about wider aspects of suicide such as existential philosophy or how committing suicide leaves a “legacy”. It was here that generational tensions flared up. Nico once exclaimed about suicide, “legacy! It’s not mentioned enough. Imagine a kid walks into [a scene where someone had committed suicide]?” It was a topic that often came up in discussions about suicide – the legacy of trauma that those who discovered the dead person would have. One notable story that George told me was that of his friend who had planned his suicide by a tree in a park. He bought the rope and walked to the park only to find out that there was a family seated comfortably under the tree. He promptly aborted his suicide mission. Traumatizing others, particularly children, was indicative of a “bad legacy”. Like many other conversations about actual death, this one elicited a conversation about generational “legacies” and what one “left behind” – something that mainly older male attendees brought up in group discussions. They spoke about

sorting out personal relationships prior to death and ensuring that no objects of potential trauma could be found. In the StreetTalkSA documentary (2019), George admitted to burning his old journals that recounted his past traumas and dependencies when he moved to a new house. He did this in case his children would find the “embarrassing” stuff when he died. Jos, like many others, hoped to be remembered as being a good person, “someone who lived like they he gave a damn” and not as somebody who was “sordid”. Hence, his desire to “sort out relationships” before his death. Jos told me that a good legacy was one in which loved ones were not “burdened” by the life that they led. Harboursing embarrassing stuff and living malevolently were bad examples for future generations. Younger attendees often spoke about their legacies in less concrete terms; of wanting people to remember them as being a good person or finishing projects before death to ensure that one’s “name carries on”, as Nikita said. During the session in May, the young girls at my table agreed that a person “only dies when their name is said for the last time”. Many of the younger attendees remarked on their parents’ legacies before they died, some hoping that they could “enjoy the fruits of their labour” and “relax”, as a stressful death was harmful to those around them.

Those younger attendees whose parents and grandparents were deceased, felt a great deal of solace in the objects they left behind. In the Woodstock DC, attendees often spoke about the material “stuff” that people left behind but also about the impact that death had on survivors and how people were remembered posthumously. The preoccupation with legacies was recycled in many conversations in the DC about the attachments that speakers felt to objects that they inherited from dead loved ones or friends. Many told stories related to how deceased loved ones’ possessions, according to Beatrix, “stor[ed] memories”. At the February session, a 24-year-old man, Callum, expressed his grief when his grandfather’s jacket was stolen at a party, while Frances held onto a box of items that her brother had with him on the day he was murdered. She announced that she had to throw away the box as it reminded her of his death, rather than his life. In walked a latecomer, Sunelle. She apologised for her delay by saying that she was clearing out a deceased friend’s house. Whilst the group discussed the value they attributed to those deceased loved ones’ belongings, she expressed her grief at her friend’s son who wanted to turf out a bag of his mother’s possessions. Beatrix spoke about her attachment to a bloodied blanket (which she washed) belonging to her grandmother. She explained, “when you’re close with someone, you want to occupy the same space”.

In an earlier session in November 2018, Eileen offered a veiled critique of the limits of the DCs’ supposed handling of death. She explained this interest in inherited objects in DC conversations as “mechanisms” through which people managed “death anxiety”. Other

mechanisms to avoid death anxiety, she said, was when people attempted to “look younger”, “never end[ing] relationships” and becoming “obsessed with objects and exercise”.

A wide range of topics were welcomed at the Woodstock DC, yet there were certain prohibitions on “religious talk” while some topics gained more traction than others. Unlike the Kenilworth DC where conversations centered around after-death contemplations and discussions about the right-to-die with dignity, the Woodstock DC seldom touched on these topics. Although George, who tried to avoid “esoteric talk”, never announced what topics should and should not be discussed, attendees avoided getting into overly political, religious, and esoteric matters. For example, Nikita and Joanne, both coming from differing religious backgrounds, began discussing the soul’s continuation after death. The conversation was jolted when Gemma changed the subject to talk about the various practices of honouring ancestors through food, drink, and celebration. She was attempting to contain the conversation in terms of immanence and directing the flow to more culturally specific matters of death and dying, and the different ways people honour their dead throughout the world. During the February session, Frances, a self-declared atheist, was critical about souls “hovering above the body” in the event of death. She argued that it was our “own sensations” we feel, and these sensations are essentially how “we attach meaning to death”.

While few people mentioned life after death in the Woodstock DC, many attendees were fascinated with *other* forms of death ritual and practice in *other* parts of the world. At the May DC, Nikita spoke about a ten-day Hindi ceremony, *Pitri-Paksha*, where food was offered to ancestors. At the table, Gemma remarked that the Hindi ritual of burning corpses in public was “honourable” and something that her Texan origins did not allow. Nikita replied that Hindus did “not actively think about it ... it’s normalised”. Joanne reiterated that to talk about death is taboo, despite her hometown being extremely in touch with the dead. She chronicled the progression of Irish-Catholic funerals that start as sombre affairs with an open casket but that end with a “shindig”. In comparison to the Irish way of mourning, Joanne claimed that people in *other* parts of the United Kingdom were detached from death – “they don’t talk about it or deal with it”.

In every session I attended, someone mentioned the *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) in Mexico – the mentions often took place after someone took a glance at the *calavera* (candy skull) toothpick or put money in the gimmicky skull jar. Attendees were enthralled by these elaborate displays of honouring the dead, the colourful clothing and jewellery and the communal celebration for the deceased. During the February session, the trajectory of the conversation at our table moved towards the increasing gang violence and murder in Mexico. A few women in my group drew parallels between Mexico and Cape Town and how the latter was the “murder capital

of the world”. Our table continued to discuss how “we don’t have celebrations of death”, like the rituals we had discussed.

The maintenance of an imminent, here-and-now, frame at the Woodstock DC was not solely in George’s hands; several attendees exemplified the secular immanence frame through their discussions surrounding donating bodies to science, very much like Engelke’s (2015) BHA members who believed that the most rational place for a deceased body to be after death was not at a memorial, but rather donated to the field of science. A young female doctor mentioned the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) medical faculty, and how they “name” and “cut-up” a designated cadaver for a year. Afterward, the medical students ran a memorial service for the cadavers. Nico, like many of the attendees, also mentioned his wish to donate his body to science after he died, mentioning that he had a lot of fun being a “guinea pig” for medical students after his stroke. Frances commented that her family had no memorial after her grandfather died – after his death, his body went straight to science. Death, to most attendees of the Woodstock DC, was something that should not be “cotton-candied”.

While attendees were fascinated by foreign ‘exotic’ death rituals and body donation, they were less confident in discussing Black South African death rituals. Apart from the outright bigoted remarks made by Nico, there was almost zero references to forms of South African burial at the DC. However, in interviews with attendees outside the DC, some did mention these rituals. Many of these superficial references were concentrated on “*other* cultures” and “their” preference of the term “passing”, instead of “dead”. In an interview, George mentioned that one Xhosa woman who had attended the DC once wrote “*ukuBhoda*”<sup>41</sup> (loosely translated as ‘crossing the border’) on the ice-breaker poster. Conversations about the local *other* that sometimes cropped up in conversations at the DC was about “Coloureds.”<sup>42</sup> During our interviews and at DC sessions, Nico often spoke about his “friend from Bonteheuwel”, a reference to Coloured people residing in a former Coloured township in Cape Town, saying that his friend would never attend the DC because “they are with death all the time” due to gang violence.

These references to Xhosa and Coloured death cultures were all made in the context where the speaker wanted to enlighten other white people at the table, especially if there were attendees from countries outside South Africa. Moreover, many of these comments implied that white people neglected to celebrate their deceased loved ones and were divorced from death. All these anecdotes conjured up a certain kind of progressive imagining in the minds of the attendees.

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<sup>41</sup> Direct translation: ‘to border’ (verb).

<sup>42</sup> Referenced as a social category and not used as a term to identify people.

Attendees thought of themselves as types of cosmopolitan intellectuals, consequently influencing how they interacted and related to the *others* in question.

At the DC, there was a belief that, in modern society and particularly in white conceptions, people were estranged from death and that honouring the dead was far removed from the community. Despite Frances upholding her grandfather's actions as reflective of a broader secular society which was "good without God", George, in an interview, admitted his confusion when it came to his own eventual celebration of death. He expressed his hopes to either have a huge celebration at his funeral or merely "wisp into thin air", without anybody knowing. Nico believed that attending the DC helped people to be less estranged from death, since white people were not around it all the time like his "friend from Bonteheuvel". Gemma asserted that white people "contained death" to just the family and emphasised that the dead were not honoured in her community – "we don't talk about sad things and death is sad". Many of the white attendees, mostly from secular backgrounds, imagined those greater, *other* celebrations of death as measured according to the "status" and the age of the deceased person. Gemma compared her own community's lack of death ceremonies to the elaborate, sombre ceremonies and tributes to war veterans – where the status of the deceased, as well as their representation to society, were articulated in the "hierarchy" of celebrations in Texas. In viewing society as highly individualised, privatised and contained, these white attendees understood that death and dying was a private matter that opposed the public rituals of *others*.

## CONCLUSION

Given the eclectic mix of attendees with generational variances, diverse professions, academic associations, and loose kinship ties, an assorted mix of topics featured at the Woodstock DC. The conversations, aided by the smaller group format, ensured that there was no predominant narrative. However, in tone, the Woodstock DC was marked by jocularity and laughter while conversations were decidedly "secular". While attendees speculated that their laughter at these sessions served to inoculate them against the fear of death, they saw their ability to laugh in the face of death as something that set themselves apart from a wider (white) public who was fearful of death, and from the foolish dead. As host, George kept the sessions light-hearted and discussions care-free while his employment of ritual-like action and gimmicky trinkets ensured a secular, "immanent frame". Because of this, attendees avoided discussing matters of the afterlife, religion and esoterica, which was quite unlike the Kenilworth DC's sessions.

Several of the white attendees maintained that in their communities, death was a private matter, estranged from the community and avoided in conversation. To laugh and engage with matters surrounding death was to defend the “community of the living” and to consciously set oneself apart from *other* whites. The attendees of the Woodstock DC thus frequently critiqued how outsiders repressed death and inform other attendees on various ways in which *others* celebrated the dead – despite minimal engagement with more local traditions. In this regard, the group imagined themselves as cosmopolitan members of society, breaking taboos, poking fun at and laughing in the face of death, demarcating their difference in relation to those straitlaced white outsiders and those (dead) who could no longer speak.

The next chapter will focus on a third social space of the South African DC; the DC Facebook group, where engagement on the topic of death and dying had a less distinctive identity. Instead, the format and structure of this DC were determined by what posters shared as opposed to who they were or how they responded to one another.

## FOUR | COMMENTING FOR THE DEAD

Outside the physical Death Cafes (DCs) and the attendees and hosts I encountered within these spaces, there were also DC “groups” on Facebook. Besides the international DC group on Facebook, there was another group that was specifically for South Africa: the DC South Africa (DC SA) Facebook page. In this chapter, I explore the DC SA Facebook group as a space in which multiple (mostly South African) communities and people engaged with death, online. Through a netnography of this Facebook space, I argue that the distinctiveness of the Kenilworth and Woodstock DC communities – as functions of their composition – and the methods of host-facilitation, were troubled when approaching the DC SA Facebook group. Here, sociality took the form of “what we share” rather than “who we are” (Kozinets, 2015: 11) and was only minimally dependent on the mediation work of the “hosts”.

### UNDERTAKING NETNOGRAPHY

Christine Hine (2015) described virtual ethnography or netnography as a way to use ethnographic methods – thick description, participant observation and interlocuter interviews – online, using participatory technology. The method was famously first used by Boellstorff (2008) to describe the virtual game, *Second Life*, as an online “mirror” of real life. Users in this virtual environment, he said, were “profoundly human” and interacted with other “avatars” in ways that he argued constituted a “community” (Boellstorff, 2008). As internet research grew, anthropologists recognised that few people fully immersed themselves in online communities, such as *Second Life*, to the exclusion of offline ones. As Kozinets (2015) showed, many people use mediating technologies to facilitate and manage offline relationships and that there were degrees to which users chose cultural and communal identifications online. Apart from full identification with or participation in a group, Kozinets (2015: 11) also showed that people online had incidental, taken-for-granted social interactions that formed “consociations”: superficial, but continued social involvement in associations or activities that revolved around “what we share” rather than “who we are”. As such, he identified online “interest group alliance networks” that were “loosely bounded and sparsely knit” but personal in the sense that the users in these groups shared a common interest (Kozinets, 2015: 47).

In many respects, the DC Facebook group was a “consociation” that was about what people shared rather than who they were. On this Facebook group, people shared stories, quotes and information about death and dying as an amorphous community which was much less distinct

than the marked identifications at each physical DC. In the Facebook DC group, I noticed that various religious, social, and cultural identifications were collapsed or invisible on the page while user posts were not easily tied to specific community identifications. But the distinction between online and offline DCs were not that clear; many people who attended physical DCs also joined the Facebook DCs. Both Hine (2015) and Kozinets (2015) argued that researchers needed to account for both online and offline worlds when situating an online culture through netnographic methods. In this respect, Hine (2015: 3) argued that mediated technologies were “embedded in our society” and that those who had access to such technologies took “technoculture” for granted.

In my research on DCs in South Africa, their physical locations, as well as the online forum on Facebook were relevant in the ways in which people like Nico, Megan and Sunny imagined and participated in the DC community. Even George, who did not participate in the DC Facebook group, saw it as an extension of the physical DCs and as a potential community through which DignitySA could further their “agenda” and undermine the values of the DC he ran.

## **THE DEATH CAFÉ ON FACEBOOK**

In 2017, whilst the first Woodstock DC was forming its roots in Cape Town, an executive of DignitySA started an online community on Facebook called the DC South Africa. Over coffee with George, he told me that, during the same year, DignitySA came to his DC, handing out pamphlets and intending to discuss their campaign (see Chapter 3). He promptly told them that the “DC wasn’t for sale”. He added that one of the members of the DignitySA group told him about setting up a DC SA Facebook page. George was not active on social media and admitted that he knew little about the group apart from a suspicion that the new group would campaign for the DignitySA cause and push their agenda under the guise of the DC, which went against DC principles. He sent me a voice note over Whatsapp,

All I can recall is, quite early on in 2017, a couple of people who attended – they were wearing their DignitySA membership quite prominently – told me that they had set up a Facebook group for Death Café in South Africa. Not being much of a Facebooker, I thought, “fine” but I was a little bit peeved because I don’t think DC is a DignitySA thing at all. I have not followed it, I don’t know what’s posted on there and I’m really not interested. I just saw [the Facebook group] as a way to send the DC message and to invite people to the DC and all I thought they were doing were reposting my posters to advise people about the DC in Woodstock. As you know, DC does not encourage any speeches, pamphlets or outcomes. So, I did feel conflicted

about being allied to another group, but I didn't really kick up a fuss, I don't know why. It didn't seem important to me.

Sunny shared his concerns. After my second visit at the Kenilworth (Dharma) DC, Sunny and I exchanged some texts about the DC SA Facebook group. I asked her what she thought about it. She replied, "The [Facebook] page seem to have been 'hijacked' by those pushing the elective euthanasia agenda?? Kind of ironic".

Over a beer at a café in Observatory, Nico told me that he was active on the DC SA Facebook page. He used the group to post funny articles and enjoyed keeping up to date with new developments in the conversation about death and dying. To illustrate his point, he mentioned a video about skull-carving that was posted on the Facebook page, which he said was an innovative way to decorate human remains for keeping after death – something he found fascinating. Nico did not know many people on the Facebook group but told me that he had recognised a few familiar attendees from the Dharma DC. He remembered that, in the comment section, some of the posts incited heated arguments. Recalling one "vicious thread", he nearly choked on his lager as he laughingly told me how Sunny took quite a bit of flak from other commenters about a post on suicide. He told me that these "fights", though "rare", were often spurred on by Sunny's comments and could be "very entertaining".

At this point in my fieldwork, I had not looked at the DC SA Facebook page, but due to Sunny and George's objections and Nico's amused participation, I was curious about the group. I logged onto Facebook and typed in "Death Café". The group was active, with multiple postings shared daily. Pinned at the top of the group's timeline was a link to a guideline on how to host a DC. Below the pinned link was a tribute to Jon Underwood, commemorating the anniversary of his death. I looked at the group's membership – boasting 56 820 followers, more than double the number of followers of any other social media platform where the DC was active. I was confused. Nobody seemed familiar to me and I could not find any South African content. I then noticed that I was looking at the international DC group, but continued browsing.

The "about" page stipulated the DC objective: "To increase the awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives" and "[p]art of this is holding regular pop-up Death Cafés, where strangers meet to discuss death and eat delicious food" (Death Café, 2018). Below the description was a link to the DC website and another link to "hosting your own DC". The page had a review panel – a four-point-eight out of five rating – where many individuals raved about the openness of the forum and the relevance of talking about death. After sending the group a Facebook message, asking who ran the group, I received a response from the host of the

international DC Facebook group, Megan Mooney, who said that she had been facilitating the group since 2013.

The only profile that posted articles, videos, quotes and questions on the international DC group's timeline was called "Death Café". The profile image depicted a black and white image of a mug with a skull on it. I quickly learned that Megan Mooney was behind the profile when one of her posts on this particular day, on the necessity to "[f]orgive that person. Tell them you love them ... because tomorrow isn't promised", led to 469 reactions, 292 shares, and 17 comments. When a number of followers agreed that it was sometimes necessary to "sever ties with toxic relationships", the "Death Café" intervened. In a long comment, she insisted that people "misunderstood" her post, it was not about "staying in a toxic relationship", and that "forgiveness" differed from person-to-person. She confessed that she had not spoken to a friend in two years. She signed off, "Big hugs & love. Megan".

The following post was a "good read" article about millennials being a "death positive generation". This article garnered 557 reactions and 252 shares. Following that, was a simple image with a quote, "die with memories, not dreams". Scrolling a little bit more, I saw a BBC news article about "grief clowns" and a link to a video about this interesting way of helping children (and adults) laugh during times of grief. This post received several affirming comments. One lady wrote, "wow fantastic!", while another commented, "My new job". A man commented, "I think I prefer the strippers they use in China". No one commented on his misogyny.

Megan, "Death Café", shared an interesting article about a quantitative analysis of people's last words. The article argued that, through years of scientific and anthropological enquiry, producing knowledge about people's last words and "final interactions" were, unlike a child's first words, hard to discern in recognisable patterns (Erard, 2019). Many users commented on the article by recalling personal experiences of the final days of those dying. One woman's comment read, "My dad developed a Scottish accent in his delirium days before he died. He was from Canada and did not have any accent other than Canadian, but his mother had been brought up in Edinburgh". Several others had reported their loved one's ramblings in a "morphine" or medicated haze. Others spoke of happy deliriums that set in, such as a nurse recalling a patient thanking her for "working together" after they shared a chicken sandwich – the dying patient's final wish. Another user recounted the day that she and several friends were seated around a good pal's bedside in the hospital ward. Her dying friend did not say a thing, instead she flashed a gleaming smile. "She knew", the user concluded.

Curious to find out about Jon Underwood’s posthumous role in the international DC Facebook group, I typed his name in the search bar. There were several posts about him, and I screenshotted a viral quote that I had seen before on Instagram (Figure 8).

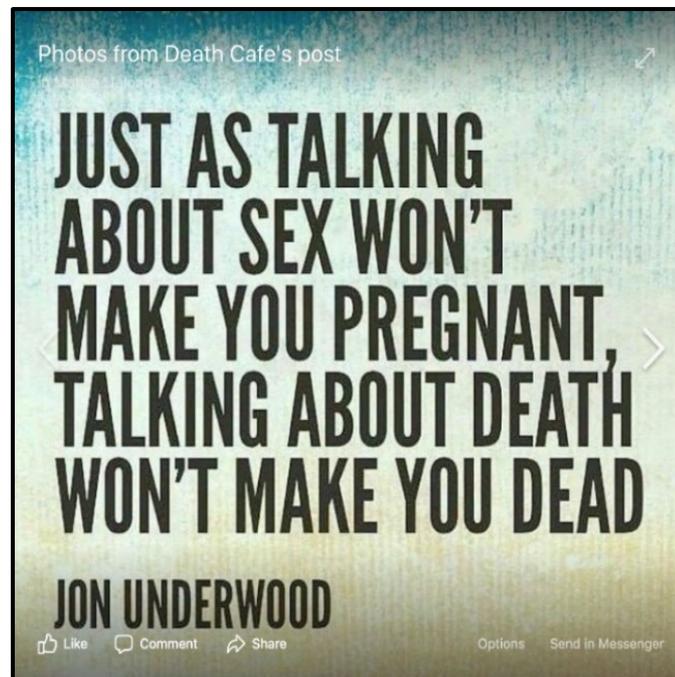


Figure 8: Widely shared Jon Underwood quote.

Below the post, Mr. Black commented that doctors had to be taught how to be direct in their approach when talking about dying. He garnered zero likes, but Ms. Blue’s word play, about how to be “dead sexy” received several reactions. Another user directly affirmed Jon’s “iconic” legacy while Mr. Red addressed Jon directly, saying “Hey Jon how r you”. I clicked on Mr. Red’s profile; he was an elderly man. It was not clear whether he knew that Jon had died, or if he was ironically addressing his ghost. There was no elaboration and these posts were merely comments with minimal interaction and engagement between each user, besides a few “reactions”.

Still curious about the controversial thread that Nico mentioned on the South African DC Facebook page, I went to their page. It had a much more modest 491 members and was founded in 2017. On the “About” page, they had a link to [www.deathcafe.com](http://www.deathcafe.com) and stated that the group aimed to “discuss anything relating to death - to take away the fear, DE-stigmatise, bring concerns into the open. Death is a part of Life. The Inevitable”. Icons of the two moderators of the group, Ha Na and Fi First, were also on this tab. Below these icons were links to their associated groups; “Conscious Dying South Africa”, “Eco-Friendly Burial” and “Assisted Dying Debate Forum”. I clicked on the “members” panel and saw two linked pages: “Right-to-die – DignitySA” and “the Dharma Group”. There were a few familiar faces from the Kenilworth DC on the Dharma group

link; Hillary, Jerome, Tracey and Sunny appeared in several posts on the Facebook group's timeline.

The South African DC group's Facebook timeline was not as busy as the international group's timeline, and sometimes had two to three-day lapses between posts. Users shared images overlaid with quotes, Youtube links, articles and blog posts. Eventually, I found the post Nico told me about – a contentious one indeed.

The thread started, as many do on the Facebook page, with someone posting a link to an article. This one was by the grief writer, John Pavlovitz. The article featured an image of deceased musician, Chester Bennington.<sup>43</sup> Pavlovitz's (2017) article discussed how in the event of a suicide, people were inclined to hold "armchair sermons about how selfish suicide is". Pavlovitz urged readers to instead consider the "hopelessness" that a person in the throes of suicide and suicidal ideation feel and addressed the problem of insulting or shaming those who had died by suicide. The thread under the post saw many people agree that the pain that suicide "victims" go through should be approached with compassion. But in the thread, Sunny accused Daniella, a younger user who attempted to convey the victims' perspective, of "glorify[ing] suicide". A hostile trajectory ensued, where the thread took an antagonising turn, exposing a heated and personal debate surrounding suicide victims.

Daniella responded to the post first, stating that the choice to end your life must take "incredible courage". Sunny responded to Daniella's comment, disagreeing, saying that "it must take incredible courage to continue onwards even though life may seem hopeless". She added "no need to glorify suicide". Sunny's comment received 12 angry reactions. Another, older woman, tagged Daniella. She agreed with Daniella and implored others to "empathize rather than judge". Another user, Julia, rebutted Sunny's claim: "no one is glorifying suicide". She called out Sunny for being "the exact type of judgmental idiot that this article was addressing". Daniella, tagging Sunny in the following comment, told her that she was "welcome to disagree" and maintained that she wasn't glorifying suicide, "in fact, I'm scared to death (no pun intended) of dying and I can only imagine how terrible your life must be".<sup>44</sup>

Sunny asked Daniella, "I don't know why you are so aggressive?" and, defending herself, claimed that she did not post the article, nor did she make up the title. Rather, she was simply "expressing her opinion" to which she is "entitled". She believed that "people who choose to end

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<sup>43</sup> The lead vocalist of popular rock band Linkin Park, who had committed suicide. Bennington's death was highly publicised online.

<sup>44</sup> In my screenshots, I did not manage to get the rest of this comment. When I tried to retrieve it later, the comment had been deleted.

their lives are neither victims nor selfish nor weak so why do we have to label them in any way they are simply struggling humans like the rest of us?” She added, in response to the older woman, that “empathy is not about trying to understand the perspective of the other by shouting down anyone who disagrees with your particular perspective”. Sunny’s comment received one like.

In a separate thread Sunny commented again, “Rather let's stop calling them victims”. Julia, following Sunny’s comment, asked “why?” Daniella chimed in on this same thread “I actually see no point in continuing this conversation with you”. She called Sunny “narrow minded”, “judgmental” and accused her of having “no empathy”. Sunny hit back, asking Daniella to explain “how one can make a courageous choice and be a victim at the same time?” She questioned, “who said they are victims? Victims of what? How are you a victim of an act you have chosen for yourself? Read the article I posted and see it from another professional perspective” and suggested the “recommended terminology” to use when discussing suicide, “died by suicide”. Sunny’s comment continued, “according to doctor Daniel J. Reidenberg the director of suicide awareness voices of education, suicide is often stigmatized as being a choice or selfish act and saying that someone committed suicide can reinforce those ideas. Neutral phrasing strips away some of the blame and shame that is too often associated with these losses”. This post garnered one like.

Another user, Ms. Green, intervened through a separate comment thread, calling for users to “be kind and gentle with each other”. She added “just cos someone doesn't have your opinion doesn't mean you can call them names”. Ha Na, the administrator, finally intervened. She posted an image overlaid with a quote, “to understand another person you must swim in the same waters that drowned them” supplemented by a comment, “as admin I welcome open discussion. But as we deal with sensitive topics let's show compassion”.

Sunny’s role in this contentious thread, especially as an aggressor, was at odds with her real-life persona at the Kenilworth DC (see Chapter 2). At the Dharma DC, Sunny curbed disagreements instead of inciting them. There was one parallel in the thread that mirrored dynamics in the physical DCs that I had attended, where younger attendees challenged older ones on their views of suicide (see Chapter 3). While younger attendees often called for empathy and consideration of the victim’s perspective at physical DCs, disagreements on suicide did not resort to overt antagonising and name-calling. Facebook’s format, where people could post as they saw fit, and where several users were not known to one another, led the two facilitators to actively intervene in the conversation as it happened, and to make decisions about the thread’s afterlife. I screenshotted and saved the post and thread to refer to later. A week later, the suicide thread was deleted by one of the two administrators.

## MODERATING THE ONLINE DEATH CAFÉ IN SOUTH AFRICA

In order to do a netnography of DC Facebook users, I registered online and scrolled through the public page, observing posts. I also went through people's Facebook profiles. I clicked on Ha Na's icon on the "about" page, which linked me to her busy profile. Her profile picture was of a middle-aged brunette with a gleaming smile and a sparkly animated frame around it. Ha Na had several attachments to the film industry and "interests" in existential philosophical views. Her cover photo on her private profile, linked to the Facebook profile, depicted the Sisyphean image of a man rolling a full moon up a mountain. Below this image was her "about" quote, "Well, who am I?!!?!??? Huge animal lover, live at the Top of a Hill at the end of the railway line". On her personal but public profile, Ha Na had several posts about dogs. I reached out to her on Facebook messenger, asking a few questions about her involvement with the DC as its Facebook group administrator. She replied quickly, saying that in September 2017, she and her colleague, Jean Dixon, founded the original Deep South DC, after the first DC "sprouted" in Woodstock.

I had seen an older post on the Facebook page dating to August 2017 where Ha Na and Dixon discussed the dearth of DCs in the so-called "Deep South" of Cape Town, a conversation that potentially catalysed the founding of the Deep South DC (see Figure 9):

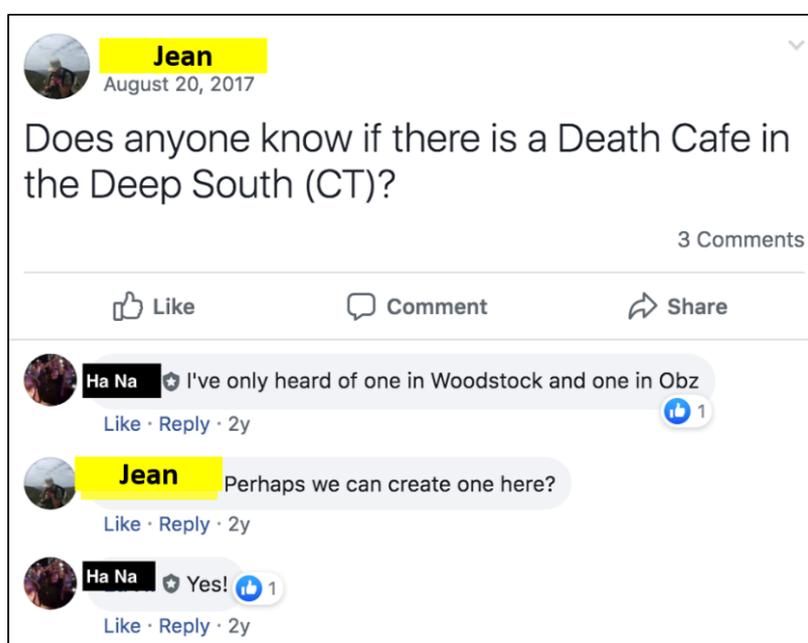


Figure 9: Jean Dixon and Ha Na discussing potentially founding a physical DC together on the Facebook group (2017)

Ha Na further explained that her role as host of the Deep South DC<sup>45</sup> was “to explain the history and principles of the DC[,] to try to reel [sic] in anyone who tries to control the group and do not give others a chance to speak”. In March 2019, Ha Na handed over her physical DC role in this group to Patricia Holcomb, another active member of the DC SA Facebook group. Although she no longer hosted a physical DC, Ha Na started administering the Facebook group in October 2019. As “admin”, she claimed that she had never deleted a post, “It is open and free for all to air their views”, she wrote. She also said that she had never encountered trolls nor “unacceptable” posts. Ha Na shared the most posts in comparison to the other users on the DC SA Facebook group, sharing images overlaid by quotes related to death and dying from various sources, some examples being quotes from Islamic scholar Rumi, Otsuichi (Figure 10), a Japanese mystery writer, and physician Patch Adams.

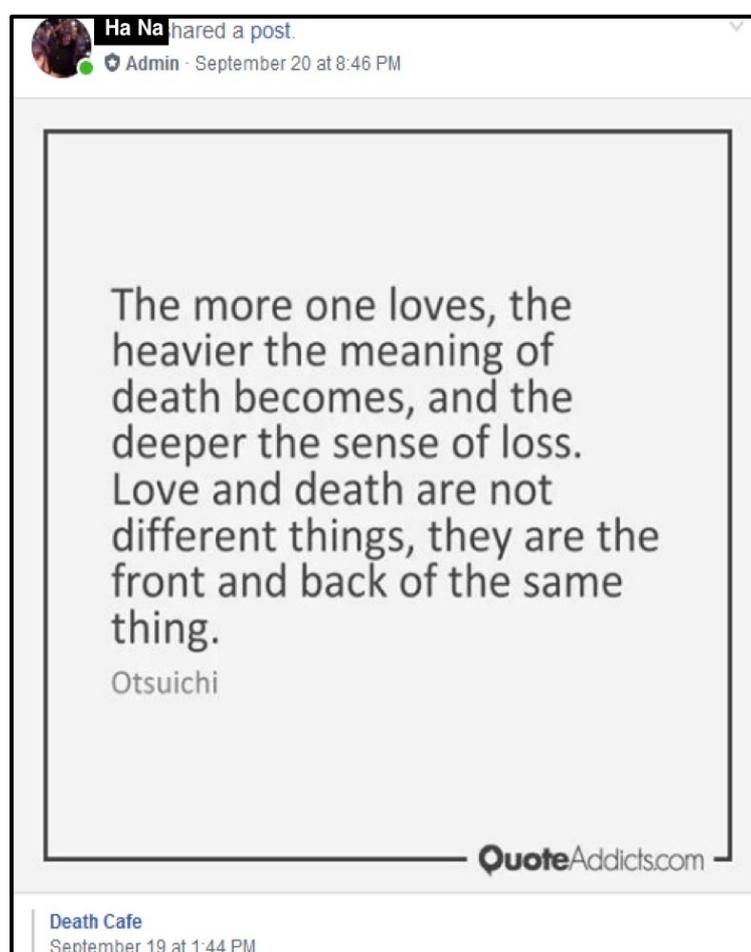


Figure 10: Otsuichi Quote shared from main DC group (2019)

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<sup>45</sup> Ha Na and Dixon initially named their DC “Mortal Monday”, like George’s DC, but later renamed it the Deep South DC.

The posting of quotes, which other members indulged in too, sometimes led to heated disagreements about the general applicability of such words of wisdom. On 19 September 2019, Ha Na's chosen Ostuichi quote led to two dissenters – Sunny being one of them – insisting that it was easier, not harder, to let go of loved ones, depending on how deeply one loved them. Another user, a member of the Dharma centre, affirmed that she understood what the author meant. She mentioned that the quote “spoke beautifully” to her and thanked Ha Na for “reminding me of something”, although she did not say what. The final comment was from a user who indirectly addressed the previous dissenters, taking a more conciliatory path. She stated that “this might not be how the author experienced it personally” reminding other users, including those scrolling through, that the meaning one attributes to death was “not universal”.

This kind of sparring was common. On 26 November 2019, another one of Ha Na's posts, this one referencing a belief in the afterlife, led to another round of comments. The post that Ha Na shared was a cartoon image of a family at the deathbed of a grandmother. The left-hand side of the image depicted the grieving and forlorn family while the right-hand side depicted seven ghosts; a grandmother sitting on the other side of the death bed, receiving flowers from her husband, three adult ghosts as well as a dog and a cat. Above the image was a text, “the beautiful irony is that our loss is another's reunion”. The post received ten reactions where people merely ticked whether they liked or disliked the picture but also three comments from a believer, a sceptic and a self-affirmed non-believer. The latter two vehemently objected to the depiction of an afterlife while the believer commented that she “love[d] this” image.

As an administrator, Ha Na could access the personal information that everyday users filled in when they joined the Facebook group but shared little of her own information with other users. Although she did not disclose this in her profile, Ha Na revealed her Eastern and Western philosophical views on death through her shared posts but did not comment when others disagreed with her sentiments. She also obscured her identity by using an Eastern-sounding name when she was a white woman from South Africa. As “admin”, she seldom intervened in threads, and denied ever deleting any posts, although the post where Sunny got into a heated debate around suicide contradicted this. Nevertheless, she was adhering to the DC tenets of welcoming all views (Death Café, 2018). But as George and Sunny pointed out, physical DC facilitators suspected Ha Na of also breaking these tenets by “pushing an agenda”. When I asked her about DignitySA's involvement in the Facebook DC, Ha Na insisted that they were not involved but that she was, however, a “keen supporter [of DignitySA] and [has her two] cents worth especially concerning advanced directives and living wills”. If people posted about these things, she did not intervene, but said that she would not post about it herself. Ha Na also said that I should talk to Fi First, the

administrator who had started the DC Facebook page, about DignitySA's association with the DC Facebook page.

Fi First's Facebook profile was rather bare since we were not Facebook friends, and thus limited by privacy settings. Her cover photo was of a luminescent tree framed by a fallen wood barrow, with the phrase "end of life matters" underneath. Under "Life Event" on her Facebook profile, Fi First only listed the "death of a parent" in 2018. On her personal profile, it was apparent that she had direct ties to Jerome (see Chapter 2), who commented (on a post on her personal profile's timeline) that the right-to-die with dignity was a "moral right" in South Africa. On DignitySA's website, Fi First's brush-stroked red and white portrait was listed under their "executives" panel. The stylised portrait, which matched those of other executives of DignitySA, including Sean Davidson, was the same image as her Facebook profile picture. I realised that she used the same name on both her Facebook profile and on the DignitySA website. I emailed her after finding her email address on the DignitySA website. She replied, saying that I was welcome to send through a few questions. After a subsequent "as per my last email...", she failed to reply. I was thus reliant on her Facebook activity to gain a sense of the person. On several posts related to the right-to-die on the DC Facebook page, Fi First said that the DC Facebook group did not align itself with any initiatives, yet her administrative position, as well as the content of her posts, put DignitySA at the frontline. According to George and Sunny, Fi First had attended DC sessions in 2017 but had never hosted a DC or affiliated with their DCs. I scrolled through to the bottom of the DC SA Facebook group's timeline and noted that Fi First founded the DC SA Facebook group in May 2017.

Fi First posted less on the DC SA Facebook group than Ha Na but was a frequent commenter on posts. Her shares were often insights into the DC as a movement or promoted guidelines for anybody to host their own DC. Outside of the promotional DC content, she would share images acknowledging the right-to-die with dignity, Youtube links about "dying wishes" and promotional adverts for forums devoted to assisted dying, structured on similar lines as the DC. Thus Fi posted advertisements for meetings of the Friends of Richard Dawkins Association (FoRDA),<sup>46</sup> death *doulas*, advanced directives, Green Burials, and End of Life Matters. She typified these groups as being part of the DC's "death positive" movement and highlighted a few humorous cartoons that accompanied the invites. One in particular raised a few eyebrows: the slide showed clean-picked chicken bones arranged to resemble a human skeleton with the tagline,

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<sup>46</sup> The "Let's talk about death" meet-up formed part of the South African Secular Society (SASS) and advertised itself as a pop-up space for "freethinkers, particularly atheists and secularists" (SASS, 2020). The last FoRDA meetup was held in November 2019.

“Most folk want to die at home but, like chickens, few do” (see Figure 11). Despite garnering ten affirming “reactions”, not everyone on the DC Facebook page agreed that the humour was funny; two commenters complained that the comparison between people and chickens was “unnecessary”.

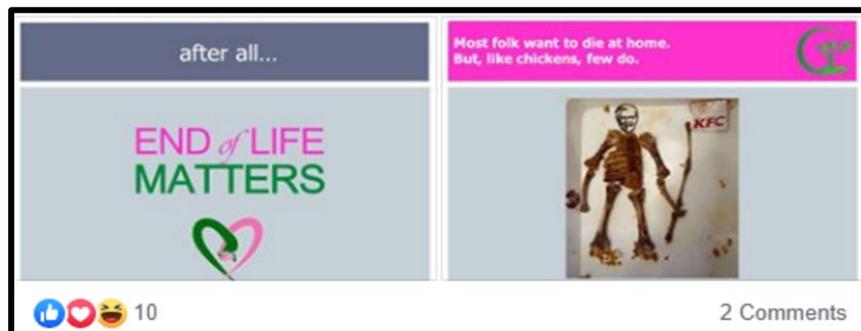


Figure 11: Corresponding comments to Ha Na’s presentation for the FoRDA meetup group (2019)

## CONNECTING USERS

While the DC Facebook moderators were restrained in their comments and in the kinds of conversations that they censored, other users on the site were more agentive in policing the Facebook group. In keeping with DC policies, these users were quick to point out when a user commented unempathetically – particularly when it came to suicide or assisted suicide – or when posts did not align with their own beliefs, often when they mentioned the afterlife, Western or Eastern belief systems, and suggestions about the existence of ghosts.

Clicking on the profiles of the DC SA Facebook group “followers”, it was clear that they were largely South African, mostly white, and that they came from various places in the country. A handful of followers were from the UK and the USA. The users’ profiles showed a varied list of vocations and interests with several retirees; nurses, a climate change activist, a pedagogical academic, a sailor (Nico), a marriage officer, and a jazz radio manager. Other user backgrounds included an organic food supplier, an adult educator, and many “alternative coaches” – such as “Intuitive Development” guides, dialogue coaches, Zen coaches, and tarot readers, to name a few. In terms of interests, followers listed spiritual interests like Tibetan Buddhism, secular interests like literature, art, sports medicine, and transhumanism with sports listed ranging from dog-walking to Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA).<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> European Martial Arts that have been adapted in multiple forms over time, including Fencing (Wong, 2019).

Several users frequently commented, posted, and liked posts on the DC South Africa Facebook group. A frequent poster on the group was Patricia Holcomb, the 2020 facilitator of the Deep South DC. Patricia's profile picture featured her full face, a bright smile, and grey hair, which led me to suspect that she was over the age of 50. Her hobbies and work experience on her personal profile revealed that she was a bereavement support counsellor, a psychometrist<sup>48</sup> and a quantum energy coach. Moreover, her profile showed an interest in both Buddhism and quantum physics. I contacted Patricia through Facebook messenger with some questions I had about the Facebook group. She replied that she had been facilitating the Deep South DC since March 2019 and "follow[ed] the rules of Mr. Underwood which is no agenda and no judgement. But also, mutual respect at all time without inforcing [sic] mutual belief". Her role, she wrote, was to "just hold space... following the Tavistock<sup>49</sup> model" (cf. Chapter 2). Besides the Deep South DC users on Facebook, she did not know many people on the Facebook group but described the constituents of the group to be mainly women over the age of 50. Like other DC hosts throughout South Africa, Patricia mainly posted monthly adverts promoting the Deep South DC. She also posted several quotes and articles accompanied by images. However, she rarely commented. Patricia wrote that she followed the DignitySA group on Twitter and "maybe Facebook", suggesting her support for the organisation's advanced directives but not having any direct involvement in the cause.

I recognised a few familiar profiles on the Facebook group, namely those of Nico, Jerome, Sunny, Hilda and Lilia (whom I connected with over Whatsapp). Like other DC hosts, Lilia posted monthly adverts for DC events and never commented or shared any posts. She ran the Johannesburg DC. Users from the Deep South DC and the Dharma DC were more active on the Facebook group than those who attended the Woodstock, Johannesburg, and other DCs. Notably, there was a lack of active Woodstock representation on the DC Facebook group; the sole representative active on the group was Nico.

Nico had been active on the Facebook group since February 2018. His profile was indicative of his real-life personality as it proclaimed, "Retired from STRESS! Definitely not retired from LIFE!" Nico's profile picture was a cartoon caricature image of him in a cap and aviator sunglasses, captioned "[Nico's] infectious grin". The profile also had older photos of him as a younger man, pictures of dogs and of course, oceanic sunsets. Although Nico admitted that he enjoyed the Woodstock group more than the Dharma DC, his active participation in both these physical DC groups, as well as the Facebook group, made him a popular and familiar face in all

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<sup>48</sup> A psychometrist administers standardised psychological tests to evaluate behaviour, mental illness and occupational prospects.

<sup>49</sup> Psychoanalytic, naturalistic observation as developed by Dr John Bowlby that involves the observation of the everyday.

three spaces. Towards the end of my fieldwork, Nico had sold his belongings and moved to Granada, yet he continued to maintain an active presence on the South Africa DC Facebook group.

When analysing our interviews and comparing the transcriptions I had of our interviews to his online life, I realised that Nico’s online life demonstrated an enhanced version of his real or “offline life”. During our interviews, Nico admitted that he had joined many online and offline groups to meet individuals that shared similar interests. One way he met people was through “Meetup” groups, a South African online application that connected users based on their interests; PechaKucha,<sup>50</sup> hiking groups, mountain rescue operations, and of course, sailing groups. Online, Nico was not the simple sailor he portrayed in our interviews, but a leader in sailing and a marine conservationist. His timeline showed an avid interest in the conservation of marine life, as he shared articles about animals and quoted various philosophies friends had shared with him.

Humour played a large role in Nico’s navigation of the DC groups, both online and offline. He was an avid poster on his own profile: he shared inappropriate quotes about people with special needs and posted tongue-in-cheek articles such as one on how learning Latin could help summon demons. He also posted an open critique that countered Charlize Theron’s assertions that she had benefitted from “white privilege”, and a quote indicating his disdain for killing marine life, what he called “the largest massacre of wildlife on the planet”. On the Facebook group, Nico’s posts were mainly of stories, pictures, YouTube links, and articles - almost all pertaining to animals (see Figure 12).



Figure 12: Typical post of Nico’s: articles and images related to animals and death.

<sup>50</sup> PechaKucha (or “chit-chat” in Japanese) is an online public presentation forum, where users upload 20 slide presentations on any given topic. These presentations are 20 seconds per slide (PechaKucha, 2020). Nico’s upload was “Sail Training for Leadership”.

Nico was popular on the DC SA Facebook group and averaged approximately nine “reactions” per post. Some of his posts received a few comments, sometimes users would “tag” their Facebook friends, others would acknowledge the posts with a “thanks for this!”. His more humorous posts were seldom commented on but were shared on other user timelines. Nico rarely posted his own content, but on 3 April 2019, he made a funny quip about dying alone, that was “[taken] from my friend Donna”,

Yesterday at work I was taking care of a lady who is CMO... Comfort Measures Only. Meaning she's going to pass soon. I sat down next to her because she was scared and told me she was scared to die alone. I was so distracted by something in my own life that I heard myself say "well, honey, we cant send someone with you" as soon as it came out of my mouth her and I looked at each other and cracked up !!! LMAO

On another occasion, he attempted to get users to “finish a story” he had started on a rainy day in Cape Town, a post that five users, including Sunny, commented on. When he commented on posts relating to suicide, he often commented on the “legacy” aspect of suicide, something he grappled with in several of the Woodstock DC’s discussions (see Chapter 3). Nico very seldomly got into arguments on the Facebook group. He would share his personal opinions in the comments and openly provided feedback on the Dharma group sessions he had attended. Other users rarely criticised him and were generally receptive to his ideas, even the ones on the legacies of suicide.

Not all users on the Facebook group found the same acceptance in the group as Nico. Sunny was very active on the DC South Africa Facebook group and posted monthly adverts for the Dharma DC. She also regularly commented on posts and shared several articles related to death and dying. Sunny’s personal profile asserted that she was interested in “minimal and compassionate living” and in “protecting the planet”. Scrolling through her profile, it was clear that her interests lay in Buddhism, nature, her dogs, and community initiatives such as directing a women’s empowerment program through conversations with young Kenyan women. Due to privacy settings, I did not see any information on her background as a nurse, a lecturer, a Buddhist practitioner, and mother of a child with a congenital disorder, facts about her that I knew because I attended the Dharma group’s DC (see Chapter 2). Our face-to-face interview revealed a significantly more nuanced version of Sunny than this pared-down profile which emphasised her role as the Dharma DC’s facilitator. On the DC SA Facebook group, she had been posting and commenting almost daily since 2018. Sunny shared articles, poems, meditation “breaks” for self-compassion, book recommendations, and group links for green funerals. She was active in

commenting on other posters' shares, mostly light-heartedly, but she was also prone to get involved in many combative comment threads.

Another user who commented, liked, and shared posts on the DC SA Facebook group was called Tallulah Smith. Tallulah's profile was quite extensive and opened with a line, "you are what you grow into". On her "About" page, she shared the fact that she was in a polyamorous relationship with two people. Tallulah was a software developer by trade and was involved with OpenUpSA, "a civic tech hub focused on driving the opening of data and providing technological capacity to civil society to promote informed decisions" (OpenUpSA, 2013). Tallulah was 37 years old and one of the younger users on the Facebook group. Tallulah was involved in several contentious comment threads, specifically around suicide, which she argued was a personal, noble choice, specifically, the "ultimate unselfish choice". She engaged with many topics posed by other users, such as when one user asked the group if "anyone here is atheist?". Her posts were often liked for being useful and she received several thanks for good recommendations. In 2018, Tallulah shared an "event" for the Dharma DC group and asked users to RSVP their attendance.

I asked Sunny via text whether Tallulah had attended any of her sessions at the Dharma centre. Sunny replied that Tallulah had expressed her keen interest in "tak[ing] over our advertising of the group" but that Tallulah had never attended a Dharma session. George also denied knowing her and it seemed that Tallulah's very active involvement on the Facebook group was the limit of her involvement in the DC.

Like Tallulah, there were several users who "followed" the DC, perhaps without ever attending a physical one. For example, the mother of one of my friends told me that she followed it since she enjoyed the content that users posted yet she never had the time to attend a physical DC. Many followers had "liked" and "followed" the Facebook group but seldom made comments. Facebook made it difficult for users to be anonymous, but there were some users, like "Evan Pasta" that I suspect was trying to hide their real identities. Evan Pasta's profile suggested that he was from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Both his profile image and cover photo featured the same image of a nebula. His privacy settings did not allow me to see his interests, occupation or his involvement in the South African DC. However, on the Facebook group, he posted mainly about the *Immortalists Magazine* (IM) launch, which featured aspects of "#biotechnology", "#regeneration" and "#lifeextension". Despite posting monthly on the DC SA Facebook group, his biotechnological posts and magazine promotions received little attention and minimal likes.

Another active user of the DC SA Facebook group was an elderly gentleman named Arthur. Although his private profile gave few clues as to his occupation and other involvement in

the DC, I noticed a consistent presence from him on the group. He frequently commented and liked users' posts on the Facebook group, often posting gags.

The users on the DC South Africa Facebook group were diverse, with differing levels of continued involvement and topical interests. This community was visible in their engagement with varying matters around death and dying; secular and religious interests, humorous anecdotes versus more sullen posts, and were supportive in *other* users' battles with grief or occasionally got involved in disputes about posts and comments that were not aligned with their own views. This relatively small, real online "community" made up a "consociation" (Kozinets, 2015:11) of people, "loosely bounded and sparsely knit", that was personal in the sense that the users in the group shared a common interest (Kozinets, 2015: 47). Relations between people in the group were more incidental, demonstrating a lack of sustained or lasting relations, in that interactions were premised on more superficial modes of networking (having several likes/reactions but few comments). Those who continued to post on the site, such as Nico, who garnered several reactions, and Tallulah, who engaged a lot but received few reactions, and Sunny who engaged with hot topics, sometimes resulting in several negative reactions, seemed to have clearer online identities, distilled in their continual and sustained engagement with the Facebook group. Some users like Talullah, who was inactive in the physical Death Cafés, demonstrated how online and offline personalities worked (see Hine 2015). Much like offline life, online interactions were "embedded", "embodied" and "everyday", in that these "banal" interactions constituted significance and meaning for the interlocuters involved. This made it impossible to discern the "whole" (Hine: 2015: 8, 24) in studying a collapsed context like the DC online. In turn, the physical locations were significantly more useful in delineating the distinctive, lasting identities of the DC group and individuals in it, whereas the online life revealed the amorphous diversity of the DC in the everyday. In other words, in researching the online DC, I found that the mediated forum troubled the distinctive identities of the physical DC locations, wherein the Facebook group situated attendees and users in terms of their subjectivities and non-universal notions of death and dying, all while showing how they shared the same interest in moving closer in their agentic reconnection with death and dying.

## **GRIEF SUPPORT**

Scrolling through the DC South Africa's timeline, I noticed that users seldom imparted accounts of their battles with grief. The exception was a user called Arthur, who, in a post on 23 November 2019, wrote about losing a friend to suicide by hanging. In this post, Arthur described the anger he felt towards his friend, particularly given that "his path was not fulfilled, his road not walked,

his circle not complete”. He remarked about the “sadness” of these types of deaths and wrote of his belief that we were here on earth, “to learn, experience[,] achieve”. He signed off, “sadness and confusion is all that's left behind now”. Many of the replies were typical of those shared in the event of death on social media (see Giaxoglou, 2015); people posted, “sorry for your loss”, “RIP” and “he's at peace now”. Arthur “liked” all these posts but did not reply directly to them, except for one comment. A user, Mrs. Blue, suspected that Arthur’s deceased friend must have felt shame and confounding “inadequacy”. She acknowledged Arthur’s shock and confusion, reminding him of the power of love and the “preciousness of life”. She stated that “at this point [suicide] might have been the only way” and affirmed that Arthur’s deceased friend “probably felt so overwhelmed”, “disconnected”, “alienated” and experienced “shame so hard to face”. She then acknowledged Arthur’s perspective, that of “confusion when someone kills him or herself”. She pronounced, “I hear and honor your shock I hear how you are hurting. And I honor that you do see the preciousness of life so much love to you”. Arthur responded, “tears in my eyes... thank you for your sympathy and compassion it really does do true to the Buddhist faith ... that is the way the Buddha taught – love life”.

Arthur’s original post received twelve reactions and 18 responses – a popular post on the DC SA group’s timeline. Empathy and compassion were the main precepts of Ms. Blue’s response to Arthur’s post. In his response, Arthur drew parallels between Ms. Blue’s comment and the Buddhist “faith”, acknowledging central tenets to Buddhist teachings – compassion and empathy. Arthur’s post and the responses garnered were a salient example of how the users of the group made sense of this “community” and did so differently than they did in the physical DCs. In many respects, his post and the reactions to it were similar to Giaxoglou (2015:89)’s study of “networked mourners” who shared their grief on Facebook. Giaxoglou (2015) argued that these users made meaning and affiliated with others going through similar processes through the participatory sharing of grief on this mediated technology.

While attendees at physical DCs often spoke about losing a friend or loved one, the audience response was very different from the one that Arthur received on Facebook. As various attendees and DC hosts reiterated, the DC was not a grief counselling group (see Chapters 2 and 3). In these physical groups, attendees were careful to curtail discussions of their personal losses and their emotional attachments. If someone spoke about their grief for too long, the group would change the topic quite quickly. Both Sunny and George maintained that the DC was not a therapeutic forum. On Facebook, however, there was a distinct space for Arthur’s grief and support for it – absent in the physical DCs I attended. Online, this type of intimate exchange was neither limited by time-constraints, guideline stipulations nor moderator and host intervention.

While such intimate interactions and forms of support did not constitute an intimate DC “community” online, these interactions and support were not evenly distributed throughout the Facebook group’s discussions – articulating Kozinet’s (2015) consocial framework.

## **SUICIDE AND COMMENTING FOR THE DEAD**

Although Arthur found much sympathy in the wake of his friend’s suicide, the topic of suicide often polarised DC Facebook users. I first came across this fact when I tracked down Sunny’s now-deleted heated exchange over “suicide victims”. On 10 December 2019, Patrick, an elderly man from the UK, shared an image of a Tweet by Matt Haig. The Tweet said,

Suicide is not selfish. Suicide is, normally, death caused by the illness of depression. It is the final symptom. A final collapse under unbearable weight. Suicide is a tragedy. If you have never been close to that edge try not to judge what you can't understand.

Nico was the first to comment. He disagreed, stating that “suicide may or may not be a selfish act”. Tallulah directly responded to Nico’s comment, saying that suicide was “the literal removal of the self. It is the ultimate unselfish act”. Her post received three likes. Before Nico could reply, she commented again, “saying that suicide is selfish, even sometimes, is wrong and harmful. It's important to stop that narrative and there's a lot written that I can link you to if you'd care to read about it”. Tallulah’s second remark garnered as many as three likes, all of which were “liked” by women, including herself. Nico, echoing a view he often aired at the physical DCs, responded to Tallulah’s comment, “I support suicide except when the body is left in a place that will cause the finder problems... If a person decides of suicide consider the consequences and limits the anguish and mental trauma”. Tallulah did not respond, nor did Nico receive a single like. Another woman, a familiar face I had seen at the Dharma center, commented in a separate thread on this post, saying that the Facebook group needed “feedback from survivors of suicide attempts”, who were obviously not on the Facebook group. She claimed, “it's not that they wanted to be dead but the desire to end unbearable states of living”.

Interestingly, the norm in several posts on suicide on the DC timeline was for posters to imagine suicide from the attempter's perspective, and those denouncers, claiming that suicide was selfish or cowardly, were vilified. When users commented on suicide, there was often one or two users that emphasised compassion above all else, a position that trumped others through reactions and likes on the page.

When threads became heated or especially contentious, the administrator or other users would often intervene. Outside of Facebook's explicit rules about participation on its site as well as the administrators' roles in the group, the users of the group upheld collective norms in the comment section by calling out those who did not show "empathy" and "compassion". This occurred when Daniella called Sunny "unempathetic" and an "idiot" for lacking compassion when she attempted to move away from calling people who attempted suicide, victims. In this case, another user and Ha Na diplomatically tried to intervene, reiterating the group's unspoken tenet of "compassion", and underlining the importance of "being open to, and respectful of, people of all communities and belief systems", a statement straight out of the DC guideline (Death Café, 2018).

Unlike the Woodstock DC where people sometimes admitted that they had tried to commit suicide, often occurring as a response to an insensitive comment about suicide by another attendee (see Chapter 3), no one on the Facebook group did so. On the Facebook group, people mostly referred to *others'* suicides; of friends, celebrities, or "sufferers". In these cases, posters often worried that people who committed suicide had online "connections" to vulnerable people who would attempt similar acts. For instance, in one thread posted on 23 November 2019 that started with a link to the infamous Teal Swan,<sup>51</sup> a number of posters again asserted that people who committed suicide were selfish and that they left a bad legacy. In this instance, Ms. Violet drew attention to Swan's online followers who identified and connected with other individuals who ideated suicide. Many other commenters critiqued Swan's methods of "death visualisations", asking whether her page was acceptable viewing for vulnerable people who connected with her. The commenters agreed that online "communities" could further or hinder the kind of "connection" that would stop someone from committing suicide.

Against these concerns, Sunny's posts on this topic took the position that suicide was a product of social disconnection due to the excessive use of social media. She criticised Swan's group, noting that the digital world already enforced "disconnection" that would catalyse someone to "contemplate suicide", which was why talking about death face-to-face, like in a DC, would be more appropriate. Sunny's comment suggested that the connections formed on participatory technologies like a Facebook group were detached, disconnected and unhelpful in preventing suicide, which she attributed to a kind of anomie à la Durkheim.

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<sup>51</sup> Swan is often described as a "spiritual guru" who uses controversial methods on her own FB group called *The Teal Tribe*, which offered "spiritual advice" for those struggling with suicidal ideation and depression. In one video, Swan implored the group's users to lie down and meditate, imagining their death in "grisly detail". The group has several young users that followed through with their suicide attempts after the release of this video. It led to a barrage of criticism from major critics who felt that she was encouraging suicide (Diseko, 2019).

Ms. White disagreed, stating that Swan’s followers, a group of predominantly younger “death positive” individuals were merely trying to connect to their “tribe”. In her view, this type of connection meant an inclusion that was thought to be difficult in real life. Her post led to others that focused on what it meant to “connect”.

## **DO-IT-YOURSELF DEATH**

While no one on the Facebook group admitted that they had attempted suicide, a couple of conversations about “DIY-death” took place in threads devoted to the right-to-die with dignity. These discussions were often started by Fi First or Tallulah, both being supporters of, and one having clear ties to DignitySA. In a September 2019 post on the DC group and her own profile, Fi commemorated the “World Right-to-die Day” on 2 November.<sup>52</sup> In the comments, the right-to-die with dignity initiative gained significant traction. Although Fi made it clear that DignitySA was not directly allied with the DC, the campaign was undeniably a marked point of interest for several of the users following the DC SA Facebook group, many of whom commented, engaged, and debated this type of initiative. Given Facebook's medium, it was also possible for posts regarding the right-to-die campaign to remain on the page without time limits for interested users to refer to later. Moreover, its “links” allowed for users to “like” and “follow” DignitySA and other affiliated death groups.

But this was not a stable commitment or equally shared view on the site. A few days later, in a thread on 6 November 2019, users grappled with the appropriateness of the right-to-die with dignity. One user offered to share the post and to help Fi with “launch[ing] the initiative”. Ms. Pink, a Dharma DC attendee, cautioned Fi to “tread lightly”. She added that the assisted suicide “choice” was subjective and that it was subject to close inspection and counselling. Fi directly responded, agreeing with Ms. Pink and stating that there were several people from the DignitySA initiative that were part of the DC South Africa Facebook group. She added that we should not have to resort to “friends breaking the law in order to help us end our suffering”. Her Facebook post received seven reacts. On this same thread, another woman, Ms. Red, cautioned that assisted suicide was a “slippery slope”, highlighting the trouble when it comes to “clarity of mind”. As she said, one of the biggest controversies that “stunted” the euthanasia debate was the ethical issue of Minimally Conscious State (MCS), including dementia. Ms. Red referred other users to a

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<sup>52</sup> World Right-to-die Day is celebrated in several countries, including France, Italy, Mexico and New Zealand. It falls within *Dia de los Muertos*.

document, perhaps a living will, in which they could draw up to define their potential state of her mind when it came to their end of life decisions.

These inconsistent views on DIY death, like other topics, again highlights the superficial and iterate relations that people had on Facebook. This was not a site where diverse people were made into DC members and shared the same views, despite attempts at policing certain values such as compassion. Instead, this group was defined by what it shared; stuff on death.

## CONCLUSION

In undertaking this netnography of the DC in its mediated and technological form, I found that there was a clear distinction separating online and offline DCs. The online group had gatekeepers (administrators) that were both users and moderators of the group. Like the physical DCs, the facilitators on this online group kept the group public and open for discussion. Similar to the physical DCs, the facilitators were accepting of various beliefs topical to death and dying, however, their intervention as page moderators only occurred very seldomly on prickly threads in the comment section, particularly when debates about beliefs around suicide began to get unruly. Unlike the hosts of the physical DCs, like George and Sunny, the online hosts' self-presentation strategies were significantly less transparent. I had to find personal information about them hidden away in links they provided and through analysing the content that they posted.

Following Kozinet's (2015) description of similar online groups, the DC SA Facebook group can be described as "consocial" in character; it allowed people from various backgrounds and communities (including the physical DC community attendees) into the group while interactions were generally not sustained or deep-going. Instead, users shared posts on death and dying that interested them and only occasionally became involved in other people's posts. Where they did, as in the cases of Sunny, Nico and Tallulah, a few users became more distinct as individuals but overall, users on the DC South Africa Facebook group were rather indistinct as individuals, and instead engaged on the bases of what they shared, instead of who they were. Their unspoken rules of sociality were formed in the Facebook group's timeline. With the exception of one post about a user's grief, and empathetic responses to it, users of the DC Facebook group shared articles, quotes and links to things related to death and dying, the content of which they seldom created themselves. Unlike the physical DCs where the hosts would elaborate on the DC tenets and make sure that it was applied in the setting, on the DC SA Facebook group, this work was done by other users more so than the facilitators. An unspoken precept that many users upheld in their responses to other users' posts, especially to posts that dealt with suicide, was that people who used the site had to show "empathy" and "compassion" for the perspective of the bereaved

and the sufferer. Those who did not honour this understanding, like Sunny, soon face a chorus of negative comments which went beyond the usual likes on the page. While the site was not trolled, the occasional shaming of an unsympathetic post quickly attached quite virulent labels to some users. However, due to the nature of most users' engagement on the site, these animosities quickly dissipated.

Ultimately, the notion that the DC had an online "community" was troubled, particularly if one used Boellstorff's (2008) lens on the internet as a "profoundly human" mediated technology. The DC SA Facebook group looked a lot more like Kozinets's (2015) consocial groups, with limited intimate exchanges, non-universal opinions portrayed in the comments and subjective, sometimes capricious, responses to various matters surrounding death and dying - this was particularly evident in discussions on suicide. Although the space occasionally allowed people to express their grief and receive empathy without being limited by time constraints, absent in the physical DCs, people did not admit to personal failed attempts at suicide, which we did see in the physical DCs. Hine (2015) highlighted the challenge of researching online spaces as singular and homogenous, which she said we could not understand without accounting for their offline worlds. In looking at the DC South Africa Facebook group, knowing a bit more about some of the users' offline personas and 'real' connections to one another, especially in contexts where these were quite close-knit as in the case of the Kenilworth DC, helped to understand this social space as something more than just an "alliance" of people who were linked solely through their interest in the topic of death and dying. For one thing, I realised that the group was not simply made up of South Africans interested in death but consisted largely of white South Africans and that their online personas were often quite different from the personas they exhibited in physical DCs. Their "consociality" was also not simply that; offline, people like Nico loved to comment on the online antics of people he recognised on the Facebook group. These comments and observations then informed his views of specific DCs, such as the one that Sunny ran in Kenilworth. While the DC in South Africa – and the New Age/alternative circles from which users were often drawn – was still a relatively small social group, I suspect that other users recognised online personas with which they had crossed paths in a wider "death positive" movement.

## FIVE | CONCLUSION

Much of the social research on death in the West claimed that people's relationship to death was generally distant and that when the inevitable happened, it happened in a privatised, secretive and medicalised setting (see Chapter 1). Against this typification, anthropologists have long shown that people outside the West had a particular "ease" with death and dying, and that the process was socially marked and ritually elaborated (see Chapter 1). In South Africa, similar patterns held for the country's indigenous people and in death found ritual expression in extensive rites devoted to various ancestors (e.g. Ngubane, 1976). Economically and socially, scholars showed that Black South Africans had long made provision for death by establishing and continually reproducing large numbers and varieties of burial societies (Bähre, 2007; Dennie, 2009: 310-330). Although such burial societies stemmed from people's acceptance of death, their origins have been traced to the violent indignities that the early colonial and apartheid governments visited on Black dead bodies (Dennie, 2009: 310-330). Horrified at these governments' treatment of indigent Black bodies, urbanites formed burial societies to prevent this (Dennie, 2009: 310-330).

South Africa's marked racial inequalities also had an impact on the layout, location and upkeep of the country's gravesites, which mirrored racial and social divides (see Chapter 1). During apartheid, especially from 1984-1994, Black funerals were important sites of political resistance (Dennie 1997). Post-apartheid, the country's foremost museums and university anatomy collections are still confronted by the violent legacies of their colonial and apartheid pasts in vast collections of human remains (Schramm, 2016; Legassick & Rassool, 2000). In post-apartheid South Africa, much political pressure has been brought to bear on these institutions to return human remains to claimant communities as an act of restitution (Schramm, 2016). Such claims were made at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in which massive numbers of South Africans died. While the pandemic deeply affected customary responses to death and dying (Niehaus, 2007; Henderson, 2011), Black funerals continued to be communal ritual affairs in which burial societies remained instrumental.

Very little research has been done on white funerals in South Africa or on the ways in which white people talk about or treat death. For the most part, research on white funerals have focused on the political funerals of heads of state during apartheid and their symbolic elaboration in service of the state's ideologies (Posel, 2009; Manenzhe, 2007: 10-26). A sizeable body of work also deals with the role that the commemoration of concentration camp deaths played in the creation and growth of the National Party among Afrikaners in the 1940s – and the growth of an Afrikaner identity (Stanley, 2006). The 'ordinary' deaths and funerals of whites have received

much less attention. Where white funerals have been mentioned, scholars noted that they were generally expensive but small events (Dumisa, 2010), that they followed Christian ritual prescriptions (Manenzhe, 2007: 7), and that mourning was a private affair, which in extreme cases required the intervention of psychological professionals (Demmer, 2006: 101). On the whole though, scholars portrayed white South Africans as having a deeply solemn, private and uncomfortable relationship with death, resembling the “Western” model of death.

In many respects, this scholarly depiction echoed the Death Café’s (DC) justifications for its work in South Africa; to break the taboo around death and dying. As I have shown in this thesis, the DC in Cape Town mainly catered to white attendees who often stated that their (white) friends and family members were not ‘good’ at dealing with death and dying, unlike their Black and Coloured counterparts. Many of these attendees joined the DC because they were “curious” about death and dying and felt that they could not explore this within their social circles without attracting social opprobrium. For quite a number of attendees, there was a sense of social transgression in attending a DC, in many cases part of these individuals’ wider participation in efforts to defy the boundaries of “proper whiteness” (Teppo, 2011: 226). As such, Teppo (2011) and Clasquin (2004) showed that post-apartheid, quite a number of white people in Cape Town joined ‘alternative’ communities of practice and belief that transcended the restrictions and orthodoxies of “whiteness”. Teppo (2011) argued that white *sangomas* and Neo-Agers were searching for a “cultural bridge” with fellow South Africans (Teppo, 2011: 243) while Clasquin (2004) described how a largely white, elite demographic has abandoned their (mainly) Christian backgrounds for Buddhist identifications.

This does not mean that the DCs in Cape Town look the same or that they cater to the same demographic. As I showed in this thesis, the Kenilworth and Woodstock DCs served very different demographics while their formats and the types of conversations that they had on death and dying were very different. In each setting, the host had a formative influence on the DC but did not entirely determine its conversation and attendance. The locations of each DC had some impact on the type of attendees it attracted, their ‘familiarity’ with death and the type of conversations that people had about death. The Kenilworth DC, which was situated in a middle to upper middle-class neighbourhood in Cape Town, was situated close to several hospice and medical centres. The DC was also situated at the Dharma centre, a Buddhist advocacy centre that hosted interreligious gatherings and practices, which impacted on who attended and how conversations unfolded. The café-style format meant that attendees could witness and engage with the whole group, and the host was present throughout without intermission or time for reflection. Sunny, the host of the Kenilworth DC, had considerable familiarity with death and dying given her background as an

Intensive Care Unit nurse. She also converted from Christianity to Tibetan Buddhism and played an active part at the Dharma centre. Sunny facilitated the group through “holding the space” and maintaining the “sacred[ness]” of the forum. Of particular concern for her in facilitating the DC were the threat posed by dominating personalities or when conversations became overly “theoretical”, often esoteric.

Attendees at the Kenilworth DC could be divided into a core and periphery, with the core consisting of a small number of committed Buddhists, white, elderly women, many of whom had some previous or current involvement in medical and hospice care, who ‘religiously’ attended DC sessions. The core group knew one another from their sustained involvement and engagement with the Dharma centre’s activities. They embodied a medley of belief falling under New Age eclecticism – borrowing from Eastern, African and Native American referents that often guided the conversations about death and dying. In the DC sessions, they often focused on transcendence after death and having a “peaceful” death, which stored karmic seeds for the next life. Members of the core group believed that each person had to come to their understanding of a “good death” but agreed that a “peaceful” one was ideal. They paid particular attention to the ethical responsibility that each person had to ensure that their affairs were in order to avoid a “messy” death. Peripheral attendees were mostly white men and women of various age groups and vocations who did not attend the Dharma centre or embrace Buddhism, but who had, like the core attendees, “journeyed” to this DC. The peripheral attendees agreed that there was wisdom in planning for one’s death, but this was done to make sure that one’s death was easier on families and loved ones left behind.

On the whole, the Kenilworth DC was recognisably Neo-Ageist, with several attendees engaged with various consumptive, self-authorising practices (such as Buddhist conversion, drug use and hypnosis) in order to reckon with their mortality and the meaning of life (cf. Pels, 1998). While they were not explicitly dismissive of white, ‘English’ cultural practices, attendees here relayed an interest in and respect for *other* celebrations of death and dying, especially traditions that looked different from those usually associated with whites in South Africa.

In contrast to the Kenilworth DC, the Woodstock DC was located in a gentrifying inner-city area where people from different socio-economic classes came together. Unlike the Kenilworth DC, the location of a trendy deli attracted an eclectic mix of individuals. The attendees at the Woodstock DC came from various backgrounds and mostly worked in the creative industries or in academia. Several attendees decided to attend the DC out of “curiosity” and with the intention to meet other like-minded individuals, despite only a few admitting to making sustained friendships in the DC. This DC did not have a core group of attendees. Conversations were marked

by an interest in alternative interment practices and humour while ‘religious’ talk, especially about an afterlife or the journey of the soul after death, was discouraged.

The host, George, adopted a “salon” style format, where individuals were seated in smaller groups for everybody to have an opportunity to speak. The Woodstock DC took on a significantly more ritualised format than the Kenilworth DC, with its introductions followed by a discussion, an intermission for cake and mingling, another discussion session and finally a reflection where the whole group came together to acknowledge one another and the work of the DC. George placed a lot of emphasis on the cake at every session, as a means to symbolise the “community of the living”, reifying the loosely bound kinship between the attendees.

George had a very different relationship to death and dying than Sunny. His first encounter with death was when his father lost his long battle with heart disease, a devastating personal experience that was confounded by his struggles with depression and addiction. In DC sessions, George often explained that founding the first open DC in 2017 helped him on his “path” to “work through” his issues. In his introductions, George often made reference to Underwood’s legacy and relied on gimmicky trinkets to break the ice and to foster interaction between strangers. As a host, his role was very different to the one that Sunny played. George tried to keep couples or friends apart because he believed that people would find it easier to talk about death with strangers. He was also not involved in all the discussions and let the various groups talk amongst themselves so that his voice was most prominent when he introduced and closed the sessions. While George discouraged any talk of the metaphysics of death, the structure of his DC and his use of gimmicks maintained an “immanent frame” (Engelke, 2015: 6-9).

The Woodstock DC embodied a type of white cosmopolitanism. However, situated in a wider racial context, participants seldom overtly engaged with the racial dynamics of the area or how race in South Africa marked different practices and attitudes to death and dying. In fact, it seemed that attendees showed a great deal of interest in *other*, more exotic, ways of death and dying, especially in rituals that surrounded the Mexican *Dia de Los Muertos*. When they discussed local traditions in South Africa, these traditions were not only exoticised, but were also discussed in ways that suggested an implied criticism of their costs and rationality. For the most part, however, discussions centred around topics of the legacies that people leave after death, the objects that remind people of the death of a loved one and stories about *other* people’s experiences with death. Since many attendees enjoyed listening to comically misadventurous deaths, this was another trope that was often repeated in this DC. And as Tupper (2015:25) showed for the DC in Edinburgh, humour here served to identify people who attended this DC as “familiar” sharers of knowledge who were critical of the public (mostly) medicalised discourse around death. At the

Woodstock DC, a *self/other* dichotomy emerged in which the foolish dead (cf. Wasserman, 1999; Carty & Musharbash, 2008; Black, 2012) were juxtaposed with the attendees and in which the attendees set themselves apart from (and criticised) a “public” that supposedly did not discuss death and dying.

At the Woodstock and Kenilworth DCs, quite distinctive identities thus emerged for each group, which was reflected in the composition of each group, the format of discussions and the content and approach to discussions on death. The same could not be said of the Facebook DC group, which did not have a distinctive identity or rituals. The DC South Africa Facebook page was a public space, open to any interested individual who had heard about the DC in South Africa to “like” and “follow” the DC. By virtue of its medium, ‘members’ came from across South Africa (and the world) while the ‘community’, or what Kozinets (2015) called the “consocial” group, was continually constituted by what participants shared in online content. This content was often just ‘shares’ of memes, quotes and recycled content from other online sites about death and dying. Much of this content was humorous but occasionally, a post about suicide would elicit heated debate, often split between those who saw this as cowardly and selfish, and those who viewed suicide as a courageous, unselfish act. For the most part, however, the engagement with the topic of death and dying occurred on the group’s timeline, where users posted and engaged with textual and visual content dependent on their own interests rather than the give and take of a group discussion.

Unlike the hosts in the DCs’ physical locations, the Facebook DC administrators took on more of a gatekeeping role. As users and posters on the site, they occasionally posted information about the location and time of physical DCs or, in the case of one administrator, posted information and links to DignitySA and their right-to-die with dignity campaign. The latter was a sore point for physical DC hosts such as George and Sunny who prevented these groups from handing out pamphlets or “pushing their agendas” during DC sessions. Occasionally, the Facebook administrators intervened on more prickly topics but always took on a conciliatory approach, often commenting on the thread and asking for compassion. The administrators seldom deleted posts because the unspoken rules of engagement within the online group kept people from trolling the site or posting comments that would incite disagreements. When a post or comment thread became prickly, the users of the Facebook group were likely to police the thread by reminding other users to be compassionate and empathetic.

On the Facebook group, I encountered several familiar faces from the Kenilworth DC and one well-liked representative from the Woodstock DC. Nico and Sunny, who were quite involved in posting and commenting on the Facebook DC, received a lot of responses to their posts online,

perhaps because they showed such sustained devotion to the group. As I have shown in this thesis, their personas online differed quite significantly from the ones they presented in the physical DCs, with Sunny taking on a much more conservative role and Nico presenting as a more cosmopolitan professional. Ultimately, I have shown the necessity in accounting for the online and offline worlds of the DC in South Africa (Hine, 2015).

Within all three spaces, the topic or conversation that came up most often was about suicide or as some called it, do-it-yourself (DIY) death. However, the features of these conversations were markedly different at each location. The Woodstock DC attendees often addressed suicide with regards to the “legacy” that someone who committed suicide left behind; specifically, in terms of the psychological damage that discovering a body could cause. While discussions about suicide were generally accepted in this DC, generational fissures saw older attendees criticise younger people’s supposed ideation of suicide. Negative comments about suicide or people who committed suicide were often met by a subtle form of reproach from (younger) attendees who would admit to their own attempts to commit suicide. As a ‘strategy’, it was very effective and would silence further negative comments.

At Kenilworth DC, attendees never disclosed their suicide attempts during my research here, but the suicides of *other*, prominent figures, were often addressed. Attendees often attributed these deaths to financial woes (Chapter 2). When the group discussed “DIY deaths”, they often did so with approval for people who were suffering a terminal illness or who were very elderly and who wanted to end their lives. Attendees were, however, more conflicted by animal deaths. As a whole, the group opposed hunting and mass-scale animal killing but considered animal euthanasia a moral duty, especially when such an animal was in pain.

While the physical DCs encouraged attendees to talk about deaths, even the ‘difficult’ ones by suicide, they made it clear that the DC was not a grief-support forum. Consequently, when attendees recounted their personal losses, the moderators or host would allow such individuals only a short period of time before moving to the next topic. During DC sessions when speakers seemed to be ‘stuck’ on their own story of grief, this caused some tension and uncomfortableness among other attendees while the person telling the tale often felt unsupported in their grief (see Chapter 3). On the Facebook group, however, nobody posted about their experiences with suicide and few imparted their struggles with the deaths of loved ones. In this forum, such posts were often met with great empathy and support while the administrators never censored such posts.

## FINAL WORDS

Each of these local DC spaces, whether physical or digitally mediated, played a role in the wilful ways in which a group of largely white people connected on the topics of death and dying. Anthropological research on South African whites has undergone a fair amount of scrutiny in the wake of Francis Nyamnjoh (2012)'s critique. In 2012, he criticised fellow (white) anthropologists of continuing to *other* Black South Africans while paying scant attention to whites in general, and "of whites who have failed to live up to the comforts of being white" in particular (Nyamnjoh, 2012: 70). Niehaus (2013) vehemently disagreed, listing a large amount of research that anthropologists had done on whites in South Africa. Teppo (2013) also responded to Nyamnjoh's critique, specifically on the studies of poor whites, saying that quite a number of people had written on them and that these studies were situated in a profound sense of local understandings. Her own work on whites who did not fit the mould of whiteness, especially on white *sangomas* and Neo-Agers in Cape Town was another answer to Nyamnjoh's provocation (see Teppo 2011). Apart from her work, Falkof's (2010) research on the moral panic that white South Africa suffered at the moment of transition to democracy over Satanism, evidenced a number of them challenging the norms of white Christian and traditional institutions (cf. Anderson, 1991). Most recently, Pieterse's (2020) research on stock car racing in Pretoria during the 1940s and 50s, importantly showed how Afrikaans drivers and audience members defied the strict rules of *ordentlikheid* (respectability) that supposedly shaped white lives.

Nyamnjoh's (2012) critique, like so many media depictions of whites in South Africa and the literature on the death denial culture in the West, suggests that 'whites' form a singular cultural group and that that group behaves in standardised ways. In the sense that whites benefitted from apartheid and that they occupy a specific position of privilege in global racial hierarchies, whites may be considered a group (Beliso-De Jesús & Pierre 2020). But in the sense that 'they' respond to death and talk about death in the same way, something that approximates behaviour in the "West", this thesis shows that even in so-called alternative white circles, enormous differences exist. The (English) whites in South Africa that challenge the norms of white Christian and traditional institutions (Falkof 2010; Teppo 2011), particularly those that attend the DC to consciously break the (white) taboo on talking about death, do so in ways that are not homogenous. The Kenilworth DC attendees defied their previous Christian backgrounds to embrace more interreligious and Neo-Ageist (Steyn, 1994) means of authorising, and making sense of, death. In contrast, at the Woodstock DC, an eclectic crowd made sense of death in markedly secular ways (cf. Engelke, 2017) to form an identity that set themselves apart from *other* whites.

Whilst the DC framed itself as a platform or a means to break the social taboo of talking about death, my research on the DCs in South Africa suggest that the supposed (white) taboo that prohibits talking about death was perhaps not as strong as the DC or the literature suggest – or at least, that it was fading. The literature suggests that due to the supposed white repression, privatisation and medicalisation of death in South Africa, talking about death and exploring it in public conversation would require conscious social transgression. In some sense, both attendees at Kenilworth and at Woodstock DCs talked about the DC as a transgressive space, where they could have conversations that defied hegemonic ideals of (white) discourse around death and dying (cf. Tupper 2015). The DCs in Cape Town, as well as the DC South Africa Facebook page, were seen as places where these (alternative) white people could strive against and overcome the “boundaries of proper whiteness” (Teppo, 2011: 226). This formed part of a new type of post-apartheid “social” (Minkley, van Bever Donker, Lalu & Truscott, 2017), in which their desires to come to terms with the scars of apartheid, their active defiance of hegemonic norms, and their acceptance of – and desire for – difference (the post-apartheid kind), proved valuable in rupturing the conditions that had previously defined them.

But as a transgressive space and as a transgressive practice, the DCs and their conversations about death did not seem to require hosts or facilitators to do much work in terms of getting people to talk about something that they considered taboo in *other* contexts. Indeed, talking about death in the DCs seemed rather unforced. In the case of the Kenilworth DC, one could probably argue that the conversation about death here were easy because the Dharma group has, through long association and a shared embrace of New Ageism, established new norms which did not relegate death talk to the realm of taboos. However, at the Woodstock DC, the turnover of attendees was very high and many people who attended this DC were first timers. They seldom needed prodding to participate in the conversation. While some of this ease was due to the format of the DC, I did not get the sense that breaking the taboo around death was particularly hard. Similarly, the active sharing of memes, quotes and personal experiences with grief on the mediated Facebook DC, showed how these mostly white, English-speaking individuals did not struggle to talk about death. Perhaps something is shifting in the ways that white, English-speaking South Africans relate to an older death taboo in ways that are similar to the shifts that Engelke (2019) described for the UK. In this regard, Comaroff and Comaroff (2016) showed that post-apartheid, South Africans in general had become ‘obsessed’ with talk about violent crime and the deaths it racked up. Combined with the more general “commodification” of death as infotainment (Foltyn 2017: 169), death and talk about it is certainly no longer invisible in South Africa. But it is perhaps in having the conversations around death, making sense how oneself and *others* situate death, and

finding like-minded, yet diverse individuals to share ones thoughts about death– over cake, tea and/or in a non-judgmental space – that one can test the boundaries of what is deemed to be proper.

The end.

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