

The invite, the impetus & the chat

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The Invite, The Impetus, & The Chat

A Gathering in three parts

Michelle Atherton

This exposition in three parts explores how a gut-response to a friend's off-hand comment and a very personal experience of the unexpected death of my mother at home led to a virtual gathering of strangers, an event hosted by art.earth to celebrate those no longer living. Detailing this sequence of events through a partial, fragmented structure - *The Invite*, *The Impetus* and *The Chat* - is an attempt to be less bounded, to not follow a neat linear, rational trajectory. To explore, by way of Bayo Akomolafe's comment that 'death is not monolithic'¹, how private experiences of death might transect with a current moment of an intensified sensitivity to death, of humans (the pandemic, social injustices, war) and across other species (environment changes and other impacts). This time seems to highlight the permeability between private and public experiences of death registered across the human and the non-human.

Akomolafe calls for new ways of thinking about life that are not so distant from demise, dying, compost, grief and loss, where death is not viewed as a disappearance, telos, an end point; for him, death needs a new cosmology. He argues that different ways of dying might signal an emancipatory politics of a different kind¹. Keeping his thinking as a touch point, the exposition questions how we might differently chart the geometry of death, the dynamic between the individual and the collective; seeing how individual and collective experiences might touch each other in varying ways. Perhaps we might reframe the dry death of modernity's human subject and move to reclaim the wet *matter of death*² by considering what could matter and how.

In the difficulties of experiencing a death and in celebrating lives there is also the kernel of a gift, an invitation to think and act differently, to reimagine possibilities for *now*, possibilities that were unsought, but that might be begun through an assembly, a communal sharing of tributes to the dead through a gathering.

The Invite

A Celebratory Gathering: LIVE from the Rowan Tree and the International Space Station was an open call, sent out via art.earth's email list. It was an invitation for people to come together and celebrate, in their own way, friends, loved ones or anyone, any organism or

¹ Bayo Akomolafe *A Certain Kind of Dying* Keynote Borrowed Time Symposium 31.10.21

anything no longer in existence and in so doing pay tribute to the full spectrum of life and matter.

The invite was prefaced by a series of questions:

i. How do we publicly acknowledge the lives of those no longer living, beyond the funeral and the obituary?

ii. In secular cultures how do we bestow significance on a life and mark the lives of the dead?

iii. If what is important about life is how it is lived, how do we collectively judge what is consequential, what counts, what really matters?

iv. Equally, how do we move away from anthropocentric views on the worth or value of the life of other species, other organisms?

The proposition of a gathering among strangers was an attempt to address these questions. To offer a space for celebrating the lives, to register those that might be overlooked or not considered significant and the importance of non-human life no-longer in existence.

In contributing to the event participants were asked to share their tributes to the dead through whatever *unprescribed* form they wished, whether that be through testimony, stories, song, tears, toasts, chanting, recipes, contestation, poetry or silence. This was a collective attempt to acknowledge and explore different ways of paying tribute, a celebratory ritual that need not be conventionally rule-bound. The hope was to inhabit a time and space in a different way, to be with the dead *and the undead*, to re-examine how to hold public rituals *and reimagine future ancestors*; to create collectively, an audible space for the dead to be with the living, those that mattered to the living – humans, non-humans, non-lifeforms.

The Impetus

The initial impulse for the gathering, which came about in October 2020, was autobiographical, not theoretical, not objective; personal, felt. It seemed there was a positive value in expressing and registering such feelings and how they might interconnect with those of other people.

During a meandering telephone exchange with a friend one comment almost as an aside, stayed with me. *A remark on the insignificance of most people's lives. They suggested that lives only become marked as socially significant when they become part of the historical record.* On the day of their death, unless the death is exceptional in some way, they do not make the daily news feeds. The interest here is not in the accuracy of my friend's statement per se, but two factors gave the comment added weight. The first was that at that time my mother was living with us, as she had been visiting just before the announcement of the

first Covid-19 lockdown and in response we subsequently agreed to stay together for as long as we thought necessary. This was my first adult experience of close-quarters intergenerational living.

The second was the summer of 2020 where publicly, on a global level, different types of deaths were being witnessed and grieved. International news reporting covered the daily felt and experienced, but numerically-abstracted statistics of those dying in the pandemic. This was conjoined by the horrific murder of George Floyd connecting again to all the contemporary and historical state-sanctioned killings of black people, people of colour and indigenous people. As Judith Butler argues, although many of us may wish to live in a society that values all life, the obvious reality is that we do not. Our society confers value on some lives more than others in a hierarchy inaugurated and fortified by economic, political, policing and health care systems, among others. She says:

‘People can be grieved or bear the attribute of grievability only to the extent that this loss can be acknowledged... Loss can only be acknowledged when the conditions of acknowledgement are established within a language, a media, a cultural and intersubjective field of some kind.’³

Butler goes on to argue that while society tolerates the subjugation of some people, their deaths can be acknowledged:

‘... even when cultural forces are working to deny that acknowledgment, but that requires a form of protest... activating the performative dimensions of public grieving and establishing new terms of acknowledgement and resistance. This would be a form of militant grieving that breaks into the public sphere of appearance, inaugurating a new constellation of space and time’⁴.

The summer again highlighted the inequalities of which lives and deaths matter and in which communities. It also felt that these deaths (through very different causes) erupted across public spheres and the public responded through a refusal of denial. It might be that this public sharing was a sensitization to death in parts of society that could afford, or were privileged not to encounter it as part of their everyday; that certain communities previously distanced or in denial were sensitised to death in a new way. For some the registering of the affects of grief in public produced a permeability between the private and the public, where individual experiences and collective responses touched each other. These different deaths were acknowledged as mattering through the groundswell of public reactions; of public opinion, of shared bodily performances (mask wearing and social distancing) and the taking to the streets for grievance and outrage, shared across communities albeit going through very different experiences.

Thinking about whose lives and deaths are acknowledged, leads also to asking what types of life are recognised and are seen to matter. The events of that pandemic summer intersected with the growing ecological awareness of mass species extinctions. The feeling, by some, that those species matter, and their loss is deeply grieved.

My friend's comment about the general insignificance of individual lives kept coming back to me, while I was thinking about the project *LIVE from the Rowan Tree*. And then, my mother died, not from Covid, but she died. She fulfilled her wishes of dying at home with us and we were able to provide and be physically present for her natural burial. In these respects we were very fortunate. My mother's death at that specific historical point, has placed her death in relation to a heightened consciousness for me of the millions of deaths that surround her's. Yet I feel her death acutely. Each death is individual to the one who died, to her and to me, to each and everyone touched by any death. Every death is valuable, to be recognised as such, with its contradictions of emotions and effects. Lives and deaths are not orderly or neat.

My mother, twice married & divorced, at times a single mother, was fascinated by history but jettisoned the many traditions that as a woman born in 1939 she interpreted as only serving to restrict and confine her. As part of this refusal she rarely attended funerals, having no religious beliefs, rather preferring time spent in her garden, half of which she left to go wild. She repeated a modern mantra of *When you're dead you're dead*. This is the articulation of a radical break, if you will, where death stops life – stops agency. Death stops the modern subject's agency.

This worked for her in the way that it worked for her, but for me I felt as if I had buried her alive, to quote Joan Didion⁵. Didion was unable to read her husband's obituaries, realising they disturbed her because she had allowed others to think he was dead, that she had buried him alive. A type of magical rather than rational thinking, the slippages of the mind. Michael Wood, in a review of her book commented 'it is possible that if we work too hard at being realistic our love will become not just dead but too dead'.⁶

For me it was also this. In my head my mother was still alive as I held her dead hand, but there was also another element, working somewhat differently. After my mother's death in the front room of my brother's house, she stayed in the front room. Why would we give her body over to strangers, however caring. As we organised her natural burial, without recourse to funeral directors, I had time to hold her dead body and spend time sitting with her. Kissed goodnight and good morning the dead form of her. Then we buried her, put her body in a hole in the soil, in the ground and back-filled the grave with earthen sods and trod it down. Above ground we toasted, ate home-made mince pies, spoke. I spoke to her and my brother sang a Russian folk song and we physically walked away. For me at that point, she was still alive-dead. Her. What others might have a framework to call her spirit, had been separated from her body; the latter we had sealed into the ground. She was and was not gone, was and was not dead. I knew where to find her. The dry expiry, the death of

modernity's subject - where self-motivated agency ends with death and dust did not make sense of this process, this experience.

Of course these comments say something about me, the drive to rationalise, order experience, to give legacy to the dead, but it also speaks to the now unfamiliarity many people have with the dead body. The common expulsion of the dead from the home, in the modern, secular urban setting in the U.K. What I had not reckoned with (again speaking to my alienation from the processes of death, which of course everyone's experience), was that this was a material affair. A to-be wet matter of death, foregrounding matter, her dead-alive body as temporary matter. In registering what matters – as a totality of mattering – does seem to matter. The word matter comes from the Old French *matiere* and from Latin *materia* ... a word for both significance and substance. So matter refers to that which occupies space and with which we become acquainted through/by our bodily senses. Matter is that out of which anything is made, material. So registering what matters – is material (not form), that we sense with our bodies. What if we could try to reframe modernity's subject's end as 'dust' and move to reclaim the wet matter of death by way of foregrounding what might matter and how. What might happen when we consider each life as *mattering* and know ourselves *literally as matter*? Could this framework of mattering open up a different positioning for matter that the modern secular traditions in the urbanised global north have treated as something insignificant, to be left behind, transcended? A matter where the centrality of the human as matter also comes into question. These questions cut across race, class and ecology, recognising this as a communal matter across species and substances.

The Chat.

With *LIVE from the Rowan Tree*... I was interested in creating an event to de-mark in the cycles, rather than flow of time, a way for being with the dead. To recognise their closeness to us. In approaching such an activity, (which I frame slightly differently than remembrance or memorial, both terms loaded in distinct ways), it was vital to acknowledge the depth and range of our experiences with death and loss. There is an intensity to feelings and emotions that are important in relating to the dead; a complexity of grieving that this event attempted to give space to, momentarily supporting in some way. As one person recognised about the evening that went into the night, it happened through the kindness of strangers.

The aim for the gathering was to briefly create something communal, beyond the funeral and the obituary, a moment of communication with other ways of paying tribute to any of the lives of others across species and non-lifeforms. This is perfectly expressed in the Dark Mountain Spring 2021 edition, *Requiem*, in the editorial referencing the eulogy by Andri Snaer Magnason titled *A Letter to the Future*:

'An ending is a communication with other cycles, other worlds, other possibilities...' ⁷

There are of course many significant death rituals, rites of passage, processes that are embedded in cultures across the world. There is increasing debate in the secular UK culture on the paucity of many mourning ceremonies, something that the *Borrowed Time* programme and publication addresses. *Live from the Rowan Tree* was not at all novel, it is in some ways intentionally slight, a small gesture. The event was purposely very simple. I asked people to go round and speak or pay their tribute; to hear each other without initial response. We then took a short break and regathered, offering thoughts and conversing with each other. It was important that the emphasis, albeit on Zoom due to the pandemic, was on creating an auditory communal space for people to listen, hear and witness each other. To hold open this collective space of sound – a medium that has its own intangibility and transience embedded within it.

That evening the form of the tributes included multiple poems, prose, recollection, historical testimony, the live singing of a lullaby and generous conversation.

Those paid tribute to were a father, Cecile Chaminade the French female composer, a brother, a father, a grieving for possibility of effecting change through artistic agency in the face of a hegemonic system, the last elephant, a grandmother, and the reduced frequency of the traditional market in Dano, Burkina Faso, where the convention of counting in fives has been replaced with the European calendar week.

The tributes were emotively layered as a group of strangers, were in turn open, honest, insightful, kind, eloquent, stirring, at times emotionally raw, poetically provocative, temporarily silent and musically moving. Moments where an experience or complex feeling was carried on a word, a turn of phrase, sonorous phrase, a breath, a composition of rippling modulation, as wilderness flowed into gentler poignant notes.

Participants' comments about the event are reproduced below. All describe the empathy of others and a deep sense of connection, albeit slightly held and let go. It is easy for me to romanticise, lyrically perform hindsight, I need a little more experience of facilitating and the structure needs to evolve a little over time. The experience of a death of another involves the penetration of death into the living. We need it to matter in a different way. Part of what mattered on the night was the generosity of the group's openness to permeability. In sharing these tributes a mutual interfusion of *feelings* were embraced, private unfoldings in a collective space, a communal listening and giving voice across people, species and non-living forms. Thanatologists believe that the last sense to close down when a body dies is the perception of sound. The session was brought to a close with singing of a lullaby accompanied by a kalimba. Sound is ephemeral matter radiating outwards, completely full and equally transitory, it was the perfect ending.

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Thank you for the ritual and for your email. I was very moved by the event. As someone who practices and teaches eco-poetic rituals online and in nature I found this particular event to be powerful through its simplicity and humanity. As a participant I felt the vibe was healing and created a deep sense of connection. The only thing I missed was your memory/contribution. As the organiser I do not think it inappropriate to contribute but rather even more connective. I found your guidance extremely sensitive and calm. I hope that's useful.

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I found the event extremely helpful, as the majority of people seem to avoid the subject of death, dying, and remembering, other than to talk about the arrangements of funerals etc. It feels that after that you should just get on with life again. I can't remember who it was that said we need other people to be able to grieve, and that struck a chord. I don't think my sharing really lined up with the purpose of the event to explore the place of ritual, tributes etc, although I think part of what I am dealing with is the absence of the ritual of the funeral, of dressing for the occasion, gathering together, travelling in procession by funeral car, seeing the actual coffin, and standing together as family and mourners to mark my brother's death and remember his life. My sister said that she wouldn't miss the egg and cress sandwiches and the small talk afterwards, but I feel that that is also hugely important. I think our rituals are part of what helps to anchor us in life, and to deal with the curve balls it throws at us.

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It was moving to hear the contributions from others at the event, particularly X regarding his father. There is something very powerful in coming together to remember those we have lost, and also a privilege to hear others talk openly, to be let into that private space.

What struck me most about that evening was the kindness of strangers, and it really helped me. I thought it would be a larger session, and that I could just be there and listen to others, so wasn't prepared to say anything, hence what I shared was so open and honest. With hindsight I am pleased that I did share, and was a part of the event.

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Extraordinary evening! Many thanks to all: poets, singers, sincere grieverers, facilitators, cosmic players, the unseen, the beloved dead...

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Apologies to all, I need to leave in five minutes in any case. Thank you for sharing so profoundly.

¹ Bayo Akomolafe *Ibid*

² For further discussion of medieval death art and wet death see Karl Steel *How Not to Make a Human: Pets, Feral Children, Worms, Sky Burial, Oysters* (Minnesota Press 2019).

³ Judith Butler *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (Verso Book 2020 p152).

⁴ Judith Butler *Ibid*

⁵ Joan Didion *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Fourth Estate 2012 p34 reprint Harper Perennial 2006).

⁶ Michael Wood His Shoes London Review of Books, Vol. 28 No. 1, 5 January 2006.

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v28/n01/michael-wood/his-shoes> Accessed 23.03.2022.

⁷ Editorial *Announcing New Spring Journal: Dark Mountain: Issue 19*

<https://dark-mountain.net/announcing-our-new-spring-journal-dark-mountain-issue-19/> Accessed 23.03.2020