THE DEAD BODY AS A *LIEU DE MÉMOIRE*. THE BODY-OBJECT AND THE LIVING BODY IN CAITLIN DOUGHTY'S NONFICTION

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Abstract

Between Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* and Paul Ricoeur's body-object there appears to be a relation of community and personal memory. Before death, the human body holds three meanings: material, symbolic, and functional, but post-mortem the body also becomes a place where both community and individual can update their relationship with death and mortality. In the twenty-first century, secularization of death practices inevitably leads to a secular view of the body. In Caitlin Doughty's nonfiction, the body seems to stand at the crossroad between spirituality and secularization, so between the meaning of the body and the body as a *lieu*. This paper will discuss how Nora's and Ricoeur's interpretations of memory and body apply to Doughty's representation of the dead body within a death denying twenty-first century Western society.

Keywords: *lieu de mémoire, body-object, true memory, transformed memory, Western death culture, death acceptance, death-phobia*

INTRODUCTION

Generally, when we discuss memory and places of memory, we suppose the only elements involved in the thought process of remembrance are monuments, places of historical importance, scraps of the past which are kept in the collective memory for a lengthy period of time after the event has taken place. On a more individual level, places of memory acquire a personal sense that helps us relive past experiences, events, and feelings on a mental and emotional level. So, we

might classify all these as being objects that trigger memory and thus remembrance. However, another catalyst of memory is the living and breathing human body, which can bear the image, the phantasm, the shadow of someone who captures meaning, similar to a bottomless receptacle of memories. Taking this even further, we can affirm that even the post-mortem body is a place of memory, in the sense that the same receptacle, now empty of life, still houses all the images, the phantasms, and the shadows of that person. Does this mean that we negatively objectify the body? What does this liaison between the corpse and the place of memory change in the way we perceive the dead body in our Western society today? And how is this relation portrayed in Caitlin Doughty's nonfiction¹? All these questions will be answered in the following paper.

THE MATTER OF OWNERSHIP

First and foremost, to be able to argue that the body is, in itself, also an object, we have to consider the matter of possession. There is ample discussion with regards to whom the body belongs to after death has occurred. The conventional argument according to which the body is in the ownership of the deceased's relatives, which is the most widespread belief in our Western culture, can nevertheless be countered by the following two allegations: (a) The body belongs to God or another supreme deity, and (b) The body is in itself a republic (Giordano 473). On the one hand, in some religions, including Christianity, the body is the property of God. Therefore, we are not allowed to do what we desire with it: to commit suicide, to alter it, to sell parts of it, or to claim it as our own within our religious communities. Thus, in life and in death, our body, our soul, and our spirit are God's to care for and to Him they eventually return when our physical life is over. On the other hand, when we die, the ownership simply disappears; our body is "something that 'I have happened to use' while my brain stem was alive"

¹ Caitlin Doughty is a Los Angeles mortician who founded the organization "The Order of the Good Death", whose website describes it as "a group of funeral industry professionals, academics, and artists exploring ways to prepare a death phobic culture for their inevitable mortality". Their aim is to make death a part of our life. "Staring down your death fears—whether it be your own death, the death of those you love, the pain of dying, the afterlife (or lack thereof), grief, corpses, bodily decomposition, or all of the above. Accepting that death itself is natural, but the death anxiety of modern culture is not" (*The Order of the Good Death*). Doughty is also the one who coined the term "death-positivity". So far, she has written three books about her experience travelling the world to observe the death practices of other cultures, about her becoming a mortician in Los Angeles, and about interesting death facts that children are curious about. Her books are what one might call contemporary death-acceptance literature.

(Giordano 473). When the brain stem ceases to properly function, the “I” no longer exists, for there is nobody who can claim the body as physically their own, so it ends up being public property.

The fact that the dead body can be seen as a *res publica*, a public good, means that it shifts into an object. But let us wonder whether this objectification makes the body less human, and we could do that by considering the role it plays in finding answers, whether in science and medical training (Giordano 470), in religion (Geary 2013), or in personal healing after the loss of a dear one (Geary 2017). In Christianity, there are “special corpses” (Geary 175) venerated as holy relics on the basis of three beliefs: (a) the dead person was “a special friend of God” during his life, (b) the remains have to be treated as prized possessions of the community, and (c) the corpse or a part of the corpse must have indeed belonged to that saint (Geary 175). In a chapter published in Appadurai’s *The Social Life of Things*, Geary writes that in the West “the preferred medium through which God used his saints to act was their bodies. Their corpses were seen as [...] the security deposit left by the saints upon their death as guarantees of their continuing interest in the earthly community. At the end of the world, the saint’s body would rise and be glorified” (176).

So, the body becomes the means to an end, that is reaching God, similar to the icons, statues, and talismans that, for some cultures, act as a proverbial one-way line to divinity. This objectification is explained through the religious function of this special body of the saint. The body becomes a holy object, but at the same time, it is so precisely because it belongs to the physical body of a saint, turning it into a place of remembrance in three ways: (a) once a year, on a specific date, the community celebrates this particular saint, his life and good deeds, (b) the community extracts from all the remembered information a message, a lesson, teachings that need to be contemplated, and (c) there are certain rituals performed on that day which have a special meaning for that said community. Usually, if they are not performed, the community believes that the saint punishes the people, thus acquiring the characteristic of an agent, a “doer” that can only be thought of as human-like.

But what happens to ordinary bodies? On the one hand, they were seen as lacking economic value, so they were undesirable and usually a source of disease. This is why, in the eighth century, the remains of the dead were buried outside the city. By the fifteenth century, they were accepted within the community, but they had to be buried quickly, so as not to spread malady (Ariès 110-139). However, even the body of a non-saint can act as an object of divine communication. In *From Here to Eternity*², Caitlin Doughty writes that in the twenty-first century, in

² A book describing Caitlin Doughty’s journey around the world, observing death rituals from various cultures. It resembles a travel journal, in which the observations are written

La Paz, Bolivia, skulls are seen as messengers between man and God; these *ñatitas*, translated as “little pug-nosed ones”, are usually kept “like babies in a nursery” (190-191) by women who quietly seized the religious power from the hands of male Catholic leaders, who claimed to be the only ones having direct access to divinity. Moreover, the skulls also have names: “Ramiro, Carlota, Jose, Waldo” (191), which gives them a certain sense of individuality and life-likeness, and are dressed up, decorated, and taken care of by the women who are in charge of them. This is done so that people remember that the skulls are not merely objects that come from a body which was once living, but their significance—their meaning—is alive and, because of their importance, they are treated as such. Far from the cultural significance of this ongoing ritual, there appears to be a wonderfully balanced relation between the body, or part of it, as object and the body as listener and bestower of blessings, thus somewhat living at the edge of awareness of the self, for an object lacks any ability of having such an active impact on a living human being. In writing about this, Doughty expresses her concern that the dead body and its remains are seen as something negatively secular in the twenty-first century Western culture, in comparison to other cultures, sometimes seen as archaic and unnecessarily barbaric.

SECULARIZATION AND DEHUMANIZATION

Death rituals that place the post-mortem body at the threshold between life and death, for fear that they may be swallowed by the world of objects, seem to go against a contemporary current that Charles Taylor calls “the nova effect”: “We are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane” (*Secular Age* 300). Because we now have an “ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options” (299), it can be both a blessing and a curse trying to choose between all the truths that we are offered on a daily basis through all the means of communication, from social media to written literature, all trying to answer the most asked questions: (a) What is death; (b) What happens when we die; (b) What happens after we die. On the one hand, among these existing options we find a sense of cowardness, materialized by the physical distance we keep between us and the dead bodies, even if they once were members of our family. “Modern life-affirming humanism breeds pusillanimity”, writes Taylor (*Secular Age* 373) and we are not far from the truth. Not only does it breed pusillanimity, but also non-humanity. The dead body is oftentimes just a number—at the morgue, on a hospital bed, at the funeral home, on the coroner’s table—, so it

as if by a journalist who witnesses the rituals for the first time, but who also has a relatively serious cultural baggage.

unwillingly becomes an object, something that can be manipulated by exterior forces, without it protesting, and often dehumanized, perhaps for the sanity of those who have to deal with death in their work, or perhaps because of a habit that simply discourages us from contemplating our own mortality. Nevertheless, the secularity of the industrialized society forces the body-and-soul whole to turn into body-and-mind or matter-and-discourse. There is some inherent cultural portion that is missing from this relation between what is seen and what is unseen. Adapting this to our discussion, we could translate this said relation into body-and-ritual, just as it happens to the *ñatita* (Koudounaris 2015), which are vessels that house the souls of their old residents, and at the same time vibrant members of the society through ritual, meaning, and belief.

Other times, the dead body-as-object can become an entertaining exhibit for the curious eyes of an audience that is wrongfully considered by many to be macabre and immoral for feeling some sort of attraction to what information or revelation a dead body can offer to the naked eye. Although some scholars argue that modern people value the avoidance of death as a result of our inheritance of the last centuries (Tylor, *Sources of the Self* 495), these affirmations seem to underestimate the significance of Victorian death photography, Gothic cemeteries celebrating the dead, and places such as morgues that happened to also be sources of entertainment. For instance, the Paris Morgue was somewhat of a tourist attraction in the nineteenth century. People could walk along the hallways and observe dead bodies placed behind glass walls, initially for the purpose of identifying some of the dead, but later on becoming a place where a murderer could confess to his crimes in front of the few who would witness it. “By the end of the 19th century, the Morgue had become one of the city’s most popular tourist attractions” (Waters). It is helpful to observe that man has always manifested some kind of curiosity toward death, specifically toward dead bodies. The fact that this curiosity is belittled nowadays due to the lack of courage that we manifest when we begin contemplating our own end does not change the universal truth that death is “the ineluctable destiny of the object-body” (Ricoeur 358). With this in mind, let us now discuss the body as a *lieu de mémoire*.

THE BODY AS A *LIEU DE MÉMOIRE*

Pierre Nora introduces us to the concept of *lieu de mémoire* in 1989, in an article published in *Memory and Counter-Memory*, where he describes these places of memory as produced by “moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded” (12). Rightfully so, they are never stable enough to be captured and kept as such forever. Due to the fact that they

derive from history, they are also personal, for the corner from where *I* watch history unfold is usually different from anybody else's; we all watch that place, but some of us are closer to the proverbial fence that separates the place from the rest of the memory, some of us are farther away, and some can even be inside those fences, relieving that memory over and over again, with the same vividity as the first time. These are *lieux* "in three senses of the word—material, symbolic, and functional" (18-19).

Let us test Nora's definition in Doughty's nonfiction. Is the dead body material, symbolic, and functional? It is material in the sense that its physicality exists, even temporarily, if not through memorial objects such as tombstones in a cemetery or urns in a columbarium. Doughty expresses this materiality creating raw descriptions of the bodies she encounters in her work. For instance, she describes the process of cremation and takes the reader inside the cremation machine, while the body of a man is being turned to ashes:

His corpse had entered the machine feet-first, allowing the main cremation flame to shoot down from the ceiling of the chamber and hit him in the upper chest. The chest, the thickest part of the human body, takes the longest to burn. [...] I raised the door of the retort [...] and carefully hooked Mr. Martinez by the ribs. The ribs were easy to miss at first, but once you got the hang of it you could usually hook the sturdiest rib on the first try. (*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*³ 17-22)

We notice the ease with which the author describes hooking the body and pushing it deeper into the machine. The ribs and the chest cavity do not seem to belong to a human being. The scene is disturbingly real and raw and her books are scattered with such descriptions, in order to create a shock in the reader, that would eventually trigger introspection.

The body is also symbolic because of the meaning we attribute to it, and most of the time this meaning is surrounded by a sense of anxiety and phobia which stem from the natural and very human fear of death. But it can also be a symbol that honors the dead. For instance, Doughty explains what needs to be done should someone want jewelry out of the bones of a deceased loved one. In Germany, she writes, laws are extremely strict, and only funeral directors can handle cremated remains. Even so, Western cremation is done in such a way as to pulverize all the bones into fine ashes (*Will My Cat Eat my Eyeballs?*⁴ 187-188), so it would be impossible to own a piece of bone that belonged to your grandmother and have it turned into a necklace. By comparison, the Japanese

³ A memoir that tells the story of Doughty's first years working for a funeral home.

⁴ A book in which Doughty answers questions that children asked her in the past, during her book tours or her public appearances.

ritual of *kotsuage*, in which the whole family is involved, allows people to “pick pieces of bone out of the ash to deposit in an urn”, starting from the feet up “because they don’t want to make the dead person spend an eternity upside down” (*Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* 186). The symbolism of this ritual is important for both the dead person and the living family. Many death rituals around the world carry an enormous baggage of symbols that are associated with the dead body. In Romania, people in the rural areas place coins on the eyelids of the dead, so they can pay to enter the Underworld. Doughty explains that such rituals used to be “a delicate dance performed by the proper practitioners at the proper time” (*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* 24), for the sake of what that dead body meant to the family.

The body is also functional for the community we live in, for the practices that we suddenly have to bring from the abstract world into the real one. Thus, we make the community and ourselves function as a whole for the sake of grieving and that of creative communication. Doughty compares the Western society with the Japanese one yet again, by stating that “at the time of death, they [the Japanese] were a community, rallied around ideas and customs” (*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* 63). I would add a fourth meaning to the word, and that is communal or local. A *lieu* may also imply the feeling of belonging to a certain community, of being able to understand something together with the community in a way that is only yours and not anyone else’s. The body becomes a *lieu* of the whole community, a *lieu* of reunion that holds significance, functionality and physicality. Giordano writes: “There is a sense in which other people figure in my psychological and ethical universe as ‘my daughter’ or ‘my father’ or ‘my siblings’” (473), just as the community sees its dead as its own. The human body, post-mortem, is after all a *lieu de mémoire*, not through its capacity of holding phantasms that still haunt the living with images of the past living self, but through its meaningful turnover, through its transformation into something that it has never been. Death turns man into a place of memory.

Nora differentiates between “true memory” and “transformed memory”. The former “has taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body’s inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories”, while the latter is “voluntary and deliberate, experienced as a duty, no longer spontaneous” (13). The question here is the following: is the dead body—as object of memory—better ingrained in an autonomous and at the same time collective stock of evocations via true memory or has it become a to-do list that one dreads to start writing? Consider the Western death practices of today and how they shifted from being a part of true memory—of warm and silent tradition—to being something that has to be done, an obligation, a formality that modern man shies away from. In *From Here to Eternity*, Doughty compares our Western death-denying society to Japanese

rituals. The difference is that Western cremations rarely have the family present and involved in the process, whilst in Japan families are given keys to the private ovens, to prevent cases of stealing and to let the family have some privacy and grieve in peace in the presence of the body and its remains (165-166). To emphasize this difference, Doughty also argues that the old generation is not the one responsible for this cultural shift, but the young one: “So not only do the young have zero death literacy, they don’t seem to mind” (167). What does *illiteracy* stand for, then? She answers this question at the beginning of the book, by encouraging the reader to “show up” (15) and to be culturally sensitive (12). Illiteracy becomes the absence of our involvement with the body within the community, the lack of cultural sensitivity, and the idea that the dead body is just that: a lifeless body that can be no more than what it already is. In *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, the author describes how comfortable this absence has become:

If your father died in a local hospital, you could visit the Bayside Cremation website, type in the location of Dad’s body, print out some forms, sign them, fax them back to the number provided, and input your credit card number to the website. All of this without ever having to speak to a real person. In fact, you weren’t allowed to speak to a real person even if you wanted to: all questions had to be sent by e-mail to info@baysidecremation.com. Two weeks later, the doorbell would ring and the postman would hand over Dad’s ashes, shipped by registered mail, signature required. No funeral home, no sad faces, no need to see Dad’s body—total avoidance for the low, low price of \$799.99. (100-101)

However, the twenty-first century Westerner is not the only one to blame, for the blame can also be of a society rather focused on profit, which Doughty describes as an “endless list of merchandise options”, offered to us when we actually needed “rituals of true significance, rituals involving the body, the family, emotions. Rituals that couldn’t be replaced with purchasing power” (139). For instance, if a loved one dies, we cannot mourn them in peace—at least not in the beginning, when shock and grief have to be expressed openly—because of the following reasons: (a) we have to pay a funeral home a large sum of money, so they can embalm them for the viewing and buy a casket which, most of the time, is expensive and unnecessary; (b) we are forced to think of our own death, of the next death in the family, of what will happen to our bodies after we die; (c) we must act with dignity and control our emotions in public, when in fact we would like to be vocal about our pain and fears, decision which usually puts a halter on the normal grieving process. All these stem from the transformed memory, for true memory would mean not starting to see my grandmother as an object I have to pay for. In the same book, Doughty captures this shift extremely well: “A son may have loved his mother, but if his house is in foreclosure and his car

repossessed, his mother's body might shift from relic to burden very quickly" (204). How is the relic different from the burden? As discussed above, the relic⁵ captures something human within it, a past self, a receptacle of images where the dead person plays the main role. The burden, on the other hand, is nothing more than an object the son must dispose of quickly, thus losing the image of his own mother.

The "acceleration of history" (Nora 7) that we experience nowadays might make us susceptible to a similar acceleration of memory. From the point of view of silent and comfort-bringing death traditions and death practices which come from and at the same time build upon memory, we have lost this meaning of self-reflection that always blooms into something other than ourselves: into the Other—more precisely, into his or her dead body. Here, the Other, always closer to us in life than in death, turns into a distant Other, that can never be physically touched—after the person is buried, cremated, or has undergone some other death ritual that also puts an end to their physical body—, thus we can never truly connect to the existence that we find to be the only thing that keeps us away from truly engaging our memory. And if this Other is also seen as some-*thing* in the sense of a responsibility that would rather be avoided and buried as soon as possible, and not as some-*place* that reunites all that the deceased was and still is with all that the community does out of belief, true memory will slowly but surely be replaced by transformed memory, taking away from us perhaps the most important thing that connects us to a post-mortem body: meaning.

THE BODY-AS-OBJECT AND THE LIVING BODY

In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur tries to define what connects the body-as-object to the living body and what separates the two:

To the body-as-object is semantically opposed the lived body, one's own body, my body (whence I speak), your body (you, to whom I am speaking), his or her body (his or hers, those about whom I recount the story). There is but one body that is mine, whereas all the body-objects are before me (419).

And not solely semantically. This brings about some sort of sovereignty and unicity of oneself. If I only see myself as the sole living body, whilst the others

⁵ We should not see the relic as part of a preserved holy body. The relic is born out of a personal and deeply spiritual connection between the living and the dead, so that the body of a loving mother can be seen by her children as holy and treated as such (that is with extreme gentleness and awareness), because what she means to them does not change after death.

are only body-objects, I am placing myself in a position of superiority—or at least exteriority—as opposed to the objects surrounding me, that are exposed to what usual objects are exposed to: damage, accidents, disappearance, and even death. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes this limitation we impose between us and the rest of the world when it comes to death and dying: “in our unconscious, death is never possible in regard to ourselves” (2). This can be translated into the unconscious belief that only the Other, who is a body-object because he/she is exterior to my own body, thus exterior to my own world and existence, can possibly die or disappear. To this extent, we may freely consider that whoever is the non-I is always an object to me, whether in life or in death. And even if the body-as-object and the living body seem to be clearly separated, “either I speak of neurons [...] and I confine myself to a certain language, or else I talk about thoughts, actions, feelings, and I tie them to my body” (Ricoeur 420), in death the lived body and the body as object become one and the same, and this happens in two ways: (a) from the perspective of the dead body itself, perspective which will always remain unknown and absurd because of obvious reasons, the body as object and the living body cease to exist; because I am no longer conscious of my physicality, at the same time I can no longer identify with myself as living, thus “I” becomes “non-I”, which leads us to (b) the perspective of what I, as a living body, call body-objects, with whom I suddenly and unconsciously switch places, because my body will become an object manipulated by the community I, as a living body, will have belonged to.

Similar to the Paris Morgue, mentioned above, there are many other cases that show us death as a source of something else but mourning and grief, cases that create around the dead body the image of an object, but not in the sense of dehumanization, but as inspiration, information, and introspection. In *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?* Caitlin Doughty discusses the Body Worlds exhibition⁶, underlying the fact that no matter the opinion we may have regarding the human body as an exhibit, it will never solely be an object in the sense of an artifact, because “once you see the pregnant woman complete with cross-section fetus, or a man and a woman having sex, or the flayed corpse playing soccer, it’s hard to stop wondering about these strange, plastic bodies” (109). By arguing that dead bodies are far more than just objects exhibited for our curiosity, as the Paris Morgue might have been, Doughty admits that the dead body has the quality of stimulating introspection from the point of view of our mortality, which is very much needed. She writes: “Close the morgues if you will, but another attraction

⁶ The exhibition showcases donated corpses that undergo the process of plastination, which was created by Gunther von Hagens. The ethics and the morality of this exhibition have been the topic of numerous debates (see Scott 2008, Singh 2003, Barlian 2006, & Moni 2017).

will always arise to fill the void” (*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, 54). What this void refers to is man’s curiosity, a permanent attraction to death. Manipulated by the community, the body then becomes a permanent learning and introspection tool, which may help us approach a somewhat solid conversation with the self or with others about death and its normalcy.

If “things are what we encounter, ideas are what we project” (Stein 44), can the dead human body be something that we encounter—by touch, by sight, by smell—and also a projection that we create and sometimes fight in our minds, the awareness of our own death seen through the death of someone else, through rituals that seem to predict an unwanted but inevitable future disappearance of our physicality? If the “body is a thing among things” (Merleau-Ponty 163), the dead body is a place among many other places, that is the halfway point between life and death, between remembrance and oblivion. Ricoeur writes: “forgetting is lamented in the same way as aging and death: it is one of the figures of the inevitable, of the irremediable. And yet forgetting is bound up with memory” (426), similar to how death, as inevitable and irremediable as forgetting, is bound up with life. However, the dead body as not yet buried neither in the ground, nor in our memory, acts as a witness, as some-*thing* and some-*body* that is still in our physical world, in our reality, only as part of a shell that holds nothing but memories. This unbreakable chain of life-death-memory-life is strongly tied to the post-mortem body as a place of recollection, of imagination, and of healing. The difference between the body-object and the living body is captured in the next excerpt from *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*:

This is just a dead person, I told myself. Rotting meat, Caitlin. An animal carcass. This was not an effective, motivational technique. Byron was far more than rotting meat. He was also a noble, magical creature, like a unicorn or a griffin. He was a hybrid of something sacred and profane, stuck with me at this way station between life and eternity. (Doughty 2)

As a young mortician who is about to shave a man in order to prepare him for the viewing, she readies the razor, and yet she cannot help but contemplate the two instances offered by the sight of the dead body. Is it just “rotting meat” or is it a “magical creature”? Doughty places it at the threshold: it is both a representation of all that is sacred and all that is profane, both a relic and some-*thing* that can be manipulated from the outside—similar to an object—, but also some-*place* that reunites two extremities: life and eternity.

These two opposing views can also replace what Taylor calls “buffered self” and “porous self” in his article “Buffered and porous selves”. He writes that the former belongs to “the modern, bounded” self, and the latter is a part “of the earlier enchanted world”. To explain this shift, Taylor gives the example of a

melancholic man. The porous self, since it is vulnerable to the worlds of spirits, “black bile was not the cause of melancholy, it embodied, it was melancholy. The emotional life [...] didn’t simply exist in an inner, mental space, but it went beyond that, in the physical world”. The buffered self is told that “it’s just your body chemistry, you’re hungry, or there is a hormone malfunctioning, or whatever”. For the modern man, things do not acquire meaning, so he can “take a distance from this feeling [melancholy], which is ipso facto declared not justified”, writes Taylor in the same article. The crossing bridge between the porous self and the buffered self is called disenchantment. Taylor further explains:

Perhaps the clearest sign of the transformation in our world is that today many people look back to the world of the porous self with nostalgia, as though the creation of a thick emotional boundary between us and the cosmos were now lived as a loss. The aim is to try to recover some measure of this lost feeling.

Can we expand the buffered and the porous self to a physicality that would translate into the buffered and the porous body? If the bridge that fills the gap between the porous self and the buffered self is called disenchantment, is death not what turns the path around to create a liaison going this time from the buffered to the porous body, called enchantment? If the self is disenchanted in life, the body becomes enchanted in death, not only because of the wide diversity of death cultural practices, but also because of the mysterious world that swallows the self after death has occurred. Enchantment can be sought by activating true memory, while disenchantment appeals to transformed memory. Doing the former leads the self into a whole enchanted world, a place held by the dead body itself, outside the confinement of the flesh. This whole universe surrounding the porous body can only be entered through rituals based on belief and meaning. Post-mortem, the body becomes a place of “doing”—for a short while—, but then it sinks into the memory and takes the form of an entire universe where that person can still be reached through time and space, or rather through the lack thereof. However, the latter is considered the new norm, that which is expected of the modern man.

The disenchantment of the body, that is its secularization in death, is a characteristic of the ongoing globalization, which, if done forcefully, can harm communities that still follow their enchanted selves, at least in death, for they are aware of the many meanings that hide behind dying. In an attempted manifesto for the importance of death values, Doughty writes:

Every culture has death values. These values are transmitted in the form of stories and myths, told to children starting before they are old enough to form memories. The beliefs children grow up with give them a framework to make sense of and take control of their lives. This need for meaning is why some believe in an

intricate system of potential afterlives, others believe sacrificing a certain animal on a certain day leads to healthy crops, and still others believe the world will end when a ship constructed with the untrimmed nails of the dead arrives carrying a corpse army to do battle with the gods at the end of days⁷. [...] But there is something deeply unsettling [...] about what is happening to our death values. There has never been a time in the history of the world when a culture has broken so completely with traditional methods of body disposition and beliefs surrounding mortality. (*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* 214)

Unconsciously, we now swim forward in a modern cultural stream that may sometimes lead us nowhere, far away from belief and ritual. We might become, that is if we have not already done so, what Herder called a “living machine” (qtd. in Agamben 48). Globalization seems to have eliminated the borders between cultures, but paradoxically man’s relationship with the Other weakens, and the much-needed cultural sensitivity disappears. In its attempt to *mélange* every community, it forgets to ask for consent from those who have already reached an equilibrium within their own local world. It is impossible to return to the old ways but bringing some of them back via both personal and collective memory would also mean reviving an awareness and a composure toward death and the dead that might start healing our death-phobia.

CONCLUSIONS

The body-object and the living body are united both in our perception of the Other and in death. True memory and transformed memory are both sides of the same coin, giving us the choice of the buffered self/body or the porous self/body, forcing us to decide between an enchanted world and a disenchanted one. In death, the living body becomes an object in the sense of a relic that holds meaning for a certain community. Through ritual, we target memory and deny oblivion, with the risk of slipping into an uninvited and oftentimes painful introspection into the land of mortality. Even so, the post-mortem body holds a *lieu de mémoire* that inherently has meaning, at least for the duration of the grieving, and then it is absorbed by memory, both individual and collective.

In Caitlin Doughty’s nonfiction, this relation is portrayed with a longing for past death rituals and for the presence and the involvement of the families with the bodies. “Death avoidance is not an individual failing”, she writes, “it’s a cultural one”, and by trying to have some “open interaction with death and dead bodies” (*From Here to Eternity* 232), we can finally see that the body itself holds more than a personal meaning; it encompasses the whole society, the whole

⁷ She references Norse mythology.

culture, and it becomes a place of memory that helps us remember and contemplate our own death.

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