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Deathscapes and Diversity: Making space for minorities' and migrants' bodily remains, ritual and remembrance practice

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Issues around migration, and the desires and requirements of migrants are especially topical in contemporary UK and European contexts, however there is limited academic or policy consideration of this in relation to death, dying, burial and mourning rites, and in particular the spatial and material manifestations of these.

Historically, UK cemeteries, crematoria and spaces of remembrance have evolved under the primary influences of the Established Church and secular provision by local authorities (with some provision for established minority groups e.g. dedicated Jewish burial grounds). While there have been Anti-Semitic and Islamophobic desecrations of graves (e.g. Manchester 2014 and Newport 2013 respectively), there have also been examples of significant innovations, e.g. in 2010 Davender Ghai secured a High Court Ruling to allow open air pyres in the UK. However, beyond specific cases, there is often a lack of understanding of the situated complexity of migrants' and minorities' contemporary remembrance requirements and how these map on to existing provision and related issues such as transport accessibility. More generally, cemetery, crematoria and remembrance provision tends to be addressed on an ad hoc basis rather than integrated into local authority development plans. Increasing pressure for land and resulting urban intensification, combined with a lack of centralised management, contribute to a fragmented approach to planning for burial sites.

This paper introduces a new interdisciplinary research project which will ask how the diverse practices of bodily disposal, mourning and remembrance found within the UK's multicultural society can be respected and enhanced in spatial and material as well as social and cultural terms. Just as understanding these needs offers important insight to multicultural identity (Hunter, 2016), improved policy, planning and provision have the potential to impact positively on the experience of 'belonging' and social integration.

In light of increasing ethnic and religious diversity in the UK (ONS, 2012), many challenges have been raised practically and politically about living together in difference within the UK. To date, attention has focused upon Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) patterns of housing, education, employment and leisure. In contrast, minority needs associated with burial, cremation and remembrance are under-researched. Death, dying and remembrance are simultaneously rooted and dynamic cultural practices and are played out at the intersection of the state (both local and national), communities, the family and religion, resulting in situated 'deathscapes' that incorporate institutionalised and informal spaces, temporalities and practices (Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010).

Moreover, while death, sites of bodily disposal and practices of mourning and remembrance are universal phenomena, they are negotiated, practiced and ritualised in diverse ways within a multicultural society. Given the lack of systematic planning policy for this at national or local levels, we argue that diversity-ready cemeteries, crematoria and remembrance sites are a necessary but currently neglected aspect of an inclusive and integrated multicultural society. Current policy recognises that challenges are multifaceted and that integration comes from finding common ground in everyday life; it seeks to 'inspire and enable civil society and local areas to take action on integration issues that are important to them' (CLG 2012 p19).

This research project will consider four large towns from England and Wales in a case study approach, each town has similar total population (circa 150,000 -200,000) with growing non-British white populations; collectively, they cover a range of UK geographical and economic regions, have socially and culturally diverse populations, including varying ethnicities and religious groups, long-standing established ethnic minority communities and clusters of recent migrants. These are Northampton (with 20% of the population identified as ethnic groups other than White British); Huddersfield (21%); Swindon, (15%); and Newport (10%). The scale of these towns allows a town-wide survey of all cemetery and crematoria provision in each location, while being large enough to encompass ethnic and religious diversity. The project takes a participatory approach, utilising mixed methods to elucidate a diverse range of research materials drawing upon primary and secondary sources, and including participant input into the research agenda and outputs. The project's research strategy is innovative in: i) its topical – but neglected - focus on migrants, minorities and integration; ii) its geographical scope, drawing on case studies from England and Wales; iii) its attention to the interplay of intersectionalities e.g. ethnicity, generation, religion, gender, socio-economic class, localised traditions; iv) its focus on towns rather than large cities; v) its use of diverse methodologies, including a touring feedback exhibition centred on participant input; vi) and its work with a wide range of participants, in order to understand the issues 'in the round' from a range of perspectives including local authority and private providers, civil society organisations, and grassroots users through Death Cafés, focus groups, interviews and interactive displays. As such, it will not only explore the material and spatial deathscapes of migrant and established minority groups, but also contribute to them.

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