Up in Smoke or Down with Worms? Older Adult Environmentalist's Discourse on Disposal, Dispersal, and (Green) Burial

Paul Stock
University of Kansas

Mary Kate Dennis
University of Manitoba

Environmentalists target their own behaviour choices as part of their identity, including recycling, transportation, and clothing. Based on interviews with older adult environmentalists, we investigate whether their environmentalism extends beyond their lives. That is, do they want to be disposed of or dispersed upon their death? In terms of environmentalism, then, considering the materials involved, including one's body, how might we explain older adult environmentalists' thoughts on their own death care? Is there a gap between one's identity as an environmentalist and one's anticipated choices about death care? We examine the death care discourse of 20 older adult environmentalists to examine Rumble et al.'s (2014) debate between disposal and dispersal. We conclude that environmental activists maintain their identity as environmental activists through their death care deliberations, but that both the ecological science of burial choices and the knowledge about green burial options is evolving.

Keywords: green burial, environmentalists, environmental evaporation, attitudes towards death/burial/cremation, earth care, disposal, dispersal, discourse

Introduction[1]

In April 2018, environmental activist David Buckel self-immolated surrounded by compost at the facility he helped manage in Brooklyn, New York. Self-immolation, the setting of oneself on fire, has been used as a significant form of protest against war and violence. According to Buckel's suicide note, his self-immolation was a protest against lack of attention to the severity of climate change (Correal, 2018). In Buckel's case, he continued his environmental activism

through his death. While we do not know whether his body was ultimately disposed (buried) or dispersed (cremated and then potentially scattered in a meaningful place among other options), his death and manner of death highlight an important question given concerns about the carbon footprint of contemporary death care methods and the rising popularity of green burials (e.g., Keijzer, 2017; Stowe et. al., 2001): Does environmentalism extend to death care choices? In this article, we interrogate the death care deliberations of older adult environmentalists from the US Midwest.

We extend Rumble et al.'s (2014) delineation between disposal and dispersal by analysing the discourse of 20 older adult American environmentalist's attitudes, beliefs and practices related to earth care and their death care deliberations (Dennis & Stock, 2019). 'Disposal' used to be the term most often associated with decisions about how to handle bodily remains. Increasingly, the death care industry and their customers embrace environmental language that embrace notions of the 'dispersal' (with connotations of a gift) of human remains (Rumble et al., 2014, p. 253).

Combining insights of social work, sociology, and gerontology, we qualitatively explore environmentally-ethical activists and how that influences their death care discourse. As engaged scholars, we led a workshop on ecology and spirituality and found a unique research setting that seemed to defy expectations of environmentalism. As Goffman (1974) might have done, we asked the group, "What's going on?" Like Gibson-Graham (2011, p. 4), we "approach the world with the question: 'What can we learn from things that are happening on the ground?'" We also see this study as an example of home ethnography (Messerschmidt, 1981) and slow scholarship (Berg & Seeber, 2016) with an emphasis on studying people's ethical engagement (Stock et al., 2019). Previously, we used a life course perspective to explore the intersection of age, place,

spirituality, and environmental activism (Dennis & Stock, 2019). The participants shared their earth care work as back-to-the-landers, EPA employees, prairie and appropriate technology activists, birders, ecologists, parents, lobbyists, ministers, and writers (Dennis & Stock, 2019). How does their environmentalism shape their discourse around their death care? We then sharpen our focus theoretically on the distinctions between disposal and dispersal and take up Rumble et al.'s (2014, p. 258) request about appropriate terminology. We conclude that the overwhelming majority of our interviewees discuss their death care choices to be in alignment with their activism. Some even felt encouraged by the interviews and admitted that their choices were not yet firm, and they were open to learning more.

Literature Review

Much of the inquiry into environmentalism focuses on who are environmentalists and why they care about the environment as opposed to those who do not (or at least not as much) (Ogrodnik & Staggenborg, 2016). And, in some respects, this sets up a false dichotomy as many who eschew the label "environmentalist" actually care deeply about nature (Haggerty, 2007). Regardless of cosmology, the origin, health, and sacredness of the planet deeply affects human behaviour and beliefs (Grim & Tucker, 2015). This is important when considering death care choices. We examine the attitudes, beliefs, and environmental effects of various death care practices, concluding with an overview of green or natural burial possibilities. We then describe our investigation, results, and offer discussion of these older adults' death care choices in relationship to their environmentalism.

Disposal versus Dispersal

Within death studies, we often talk of disposal. We collectively remove human remains from our everyday life – in caskets or country(-like) cemeteries – we aim to segregate the dead and the living. However, Rumble et al. (2014) observe how both the death care industry and individuals utilize the language of environmentalism. Many consider human remains as a gift to contribute to an earthly cycle. This explicitly "environmentalist discourse blurs the boundaries between environments for the dead and environments for the living" (Rumble et al., 2014, p. 244). By examining environmentalists' thinking on death care options we can interrogate whether the disposal/dispersal dichotomy captures the nuance of individual deliberations.

While cremation as a death care choice is often believed to be the more environmentally-conscious decision, very little data measurement on the environmental impacts of death care choices exist (Keijzer, 2017). Furthermore, there is little research that looks at how environmentalists talk about what will happen to their bodily remains (Kelly, 2015; Davies & Rumble, 2012; Rumble et al., 2014). Their long-view perspective as environmentalists since the emergence of contemporary environmentalism is unique (Dennis & Stock, 2019). For many, death care choices remain most influenced by family tradition. However, those traditions can be challenged through identity issues highlighted by social movement involvement and geographic mobility. As Haenfler et al. (2012) discuss, lifestyle movements, like environmentalism, involve living an engaged life as a social tactic and identity-formation. Thus, some movements exhibit a type of negotiation between public and private responsibility (Middlemiss, 2014) or quiet activism, where the actions involved tend more toward gardening, childcare, or bureaucratic maintenance rather than typical movement tactics (Pottinger, 2017). This kind of intimate-level or relational aspect of environmentalism is understudied (Jamieson, 2019). Some may even

decide to opt out of front-line activism completely. This quiescence (Gaventa, 1980) indicates that, while social beings, humans are not innately drawn to involvement in social movements even when it is in their best interests. Thus, people personally concerned about environmentalism often avoid possibly uncomfortable confrontations in public (Kennedy, 2016). Like public avoidance, individuals also privately avoid death: when they fail to decide what will happen to their bodily remains, leaving it to the living to decide.

We argue that the death care deliberations of our participants represent examples of their environmentalism (Horton, 2003). Most directly, the choice of disposal or dispersal method offers a chance to express what Lifton (Lifton & Olsen, 1974) calls symbolic immortality that:

> gives meaning to our existence by preserving our connection to others in material ways in this life while ensuring our continued symbolic connection to others once we have left this mortal coil (Vigilant & Williamson, 2003, p. 173). (pp. 69-90)

This is also enhanced when one considers their death care choice as a gift. To consider one's bodily remains a gift enables one to craft:

> self-narratives about why they would choose one mode of disposal over another operate beyond a sacred–utilitarian dichotomy; the formerly utilitarian understanding of recycling or reuse is now re-enchanted to grant a spiritual dimension to such practices which shifts the focus onto gifting, even after death. (Rumble et al., 2014, p. 253)

This gift (Mauss, 1990) connects the bodily remains to the original giver forever (Rumble et al., 2014, pp. 255-256). Seeking "ontological order" between the past that one lived and a future where one will not be alive offers people a final chance to secure a meaningful place in the

world. An emphasis on green burials, especially after just being introduced to them, from some of our interviewees, offers a new discursive space for environmental activists to consider their legacy as a person as well as their last potential gift to the world that deepens our understanding of what death scholars refer to as dispersal.

Attitudes and Beliefs about Burial

Death care choices reflect views towards the body, the family, place, and community institutions (Jupp, 1993; Murcott, 2012; Walter, 2008). Casal et al. (2010), studying residents in Spain and France, found that the "choice of cremation or burial is mainly dependent on one's religion and on the spouse's choice" (p. 774). Specifically, Jupp (1993) documents the increasing ease and availability of cremation in England over the latter half of the 20th century. This availability increased individuals' and families' "choice" of cremation over typical Christian burial practices that increasingly involved an expensive package of embalming, make up/reconstruction, casket, vault, lawn-like cemetery, and viewings/ceremonies at a mortuary run by an undertaker (Murcott, 2012). Mitford's (1963) exposé in *The American Way of Death* highlighted how many of those pieces of the funeral became the default.

Beyond the choice of how the deceased body will be treated and processed (including minimally left alone), the choice of what to do with bodily remains includes meaning-filled decisions about location and place related to one's life history (Tisdale, 2018). As Murcott (2012) writes, "The predicament of the dead belongs not to them but to the living" (p. 131). Stott et al. (2018) contend, "we choose a place [to be buried] based on our desire to have our life be remembered and pro-longed, even, and especially, after we are dead and gone" (p. 480). The form of disposal or dispersal including the material objects involved in these processes both designate and represent interrelated values, ethics, beliefs, life histories, identities, and

relationships such that a distinction is made between those who are now dead and the living (Horton, 2003; Streb & Kolnberger, 2019). Place, along with religious affiliation and family connections, is of utmost importance (Casal et al., 2010; Hockey et al., 2011; Snell, 2003). Those who spent time in multiple places struggle with identifying the place that they most want to "remain" (Casal et al., 2010) that most "tells" the world how they want to be remembered.

Previous studies have not specifically focused on older adult environmentalists' discourse on death care. With the emergence of literature examining the ecological impact of death care choices, this study begins to address this gap. In terms of environmentalism, how might we understand older adult environmentalists' deliberations on how and where their bodies will be disposed? Do they contemplate what kind of carbon footprint the death care options contribute? Or is their thinking influenced more by family tradition? Is there a gap between one's identity as a dedicated environmentalist and one's anticipated death care option?

Environmental Effects of Death care Options[2]

We examine some of the socio-environmental consequences of embalming, burial, cremation and green burials. While many believe that cremation is more environmentally friendly, there are few direct comparison studies (Oliveira et al., 2012; Keijzer, 2017).

Embalm and Bury

In many discussions about what to do with human remains, or the waste of concluded lived lives, this becomes an environmental issue. Canning and Szmigin (2010) summarise some potential culprits with burial: "Possible contaminants from coffins include preservatives, varnishes, and sealers on wood coffins, and lead, zinc, copper, and steel in metal coffins (Spongberg & Becks

2000)" (p. 1133). Today's lawn-like cemeteries consistently deposit caskets, not just into the ground, but into concrete vaults to help prevent subsidence and thus maintain the lawn-like quality of cemeteries, which also increases the environmental costs (Kelly, 2015). Despite these material issues, this form of burial represent a still-common form of death care. While some places retain prohibitions on disturbing the dead (Rumble et al., 2014: 245) others advocate for clear policies enabling, rather than discouraging, the re-use of these kinds of graves as a matter of space saving and keeping families together (Rugg & Holland, 2017).

Keijzer's (2017) benchmark lifecycle analysis comparison between burial and cremation in the Netherlands found that the cotton lining of average coffins and the stone monument (mostly due to transportation) cost the most in terms of environmental impact (measured by carbon footprint or shadow pricing) for the average burial. Notably, burial vaults do not seem to be a typical part of Dutch burials. Rumble et al. (2014) compare four types of dispersal (cremation, natural, alkaline-hydrolysis, and freeze-drying) with an explicit focus on their environmental credentials to wrestle with our perceptions of what should be done with a body once it has ceased to be a living human being.

Olson (2016) goes further to explore the meaning of "necro-waste" that might in fact harm the living whether through polluted air from cremation or leaking embalming fluids.[3] Keijzer (2017) found that how we judge land use offered one of the most difficult areas of comparison. If cemeteries, especially in cities, serve as green space and a positive contributor to social engagement, then burial poses no threat to land use interpretation (Evensen et al., 2017). However, if we judge cemeteries as taking up land that could be put to more valuable use (like agriculture or amenities), then cremation can feel like a contribution to conservation (Davies & Rumble, 2012).

Cremation

By far, the fastest growth in death care option has been cremation (Jupp, 1993; Rumble et al., 2014). While many environmentalists declare they will be cremated, that choice still takes an environmental toll, especially in the energy necessary and release of mercury. Keijzer (2017) describes the uneven regulations on crematoria flue emissions. Kelly (2015) engages the debate whether cremation is more environmentally friendly or conserves land with mixed conclusions (See also https://www.cremationassociation.org/page/CremationContinues).

Cremation remains attractive because it allows for dispersal and takes up less space, if any, depending on where the ashes are dispersed (Kelly, 2015). In many ways the distinction between disposal and dispersal is a distinction between waste and gift (Davies & Rumble, 2012: 97-119). Under the umbrella of cremation, we can discuss people's choice to donate their body to science as eventually that body will be cremated (Krupar, 2018). When donating one's body to science, you can almost hear the capital-S in Science. There is an embedded notion of offering their body (their accumulated life?) as an ethical gift to the world (Saad 2017) that resonates with environmentalism as a lifestyle (Haenfler et al., 2012; Berg & Seeber, 2016).

Green Burial

The emergence of cremation as a preferred form of death care illuminates a fragmenting of religious authority as well as a rebuke to the costs associated with typical burial procedures (Mitford, 1963; Kelly, 2015; MacMurray & Futrell, 2019). The re-emergence of green or natural burials in many ways continues that trend, albeit with different and contested meanings

associated with place, land, religion, and relationships including those related to the tension between disposal and dispersal (e.g., Zeng et al., 2016).

Green burial involves a minimalist approach to burying of the dead that reduces the materials involved. Often the body is wrapped in a shroud or placed in a cardboard box and laid directly into the ground, as Kelly (2015) describes:

> Human decay is regarded as good and valuable, as microbes and insects descend to feed on the dead. As food and nourishment for other creatures, the corpse is of consequence to the land and to the species of mammals, birds, amphibians, plants, and insects that inhabit it. In essence, the corpse is of consequence to the planet. (p. 4)

While it is difficult to assess green burial trends, we feel safe to note that they are increasing. With some parallels to how the body may be treated in green burials, Jewish and Muslim traditions forbid cremation and emphasise simplicity. One study concluded that an older Jewish cemetery contributed in a measurably positive way to conservation efforts in Berlin (Kowarik et al., 2016; Löki et al., 2019). Coutts et al. (2018) also address the major concern over land by involving green burial grounds in conservation planning.

Options include incorporating one's cremated ashes into a nutrient-rich soil for a memorial plant or embedding those ashes into a memorial that will help to regrow coral reefs (https://livingreefmemorial.com/). Further, you can choose fashionable burial clothing (Michel & Lee, 2017), including a suit that grows mushrooms (Banerji, 2016) or place yourself in a pod that will grow into a tree (https://www.capsulamundi.it/en/). More simply, a body can be buried in an 'ecopod' (https://www.naturalburialcompany.com/ecopod/) or turned into compost (https://www.recompose.life/) (Barnett, 2018). These new green burial options challenge our notions of landscape (Hockey et al., 2012), nay, death-scapes (Yarwood et al., 2015).

Motivations.

Davies and Rumble (2012) outline people's emphasis on environmentalism, including conservation, romanticism, place, aesthetics, and cost. Keijzer (2017) measured the choice of burial or cremation at "respectively 0.01[%] and 0.03% of a person's [total] life carbon footprint" (pp. 727-728). Canning and Szmigin (2010) argue, from a consumer angle, that green burials offer both long-term environmental benefits, but also ease financial pressures. A green burial offers a chance for symbolic immortality by re-entering nature via a process of decomposition while also offering shared activism with family or friends. While some have documented feelings of disorientation related to green burials (Balonier et al., 2019), they are on the rise and are becoming a significant player in the deathscape. Paying attention to the discourse around green burials is an important way to understand everyday environmentalism.

Methods

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

The leaders of an interfaith ecological community organisation invited the authors to facilitate the community conversation on the papal encyclical addressing humans' relationship to the environment. This workshop inspired this study and through our relationship with one of the leaders, we introduced the study and the recruitment criteria. We adopted a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants (Creswell, 2013). We recruited people who met the criteria of: a) 60 years and older, b) living in Kansas, c) engaged in environmental activities, and d) having spiritual values that guide environmentalism. We intentionally chose Kansas for our study because the authors lived there, had existing collaborations in the community, and for the unique

environmental issues rooted in this particular location, both positive (the most prairies) and challenging (agriculture, Ogallala aquifer).

Following university IRB approval, we met with the leader of a local community coalition—a node in the eco-faith community. He networked on our behalf, initially introducing the study to community members. When they consented to be interviewed, they gave permission to have their contact information passed forward to us. Additionally, we contacted an order of environmentally-active Catholic sisters linked by earth care work to some in our sample that met the criteria and interviewed four. The authors interviewed participants in tandem, co-interviewing together. We did so in order to more fully combine our disciplinary perspectives, western and Indigenous methodological collaboration in our engaged research to effectively enhance the data collection and analysis (Holland et al., 2010). We endeavoured to have mutually respectful dialogue with our participants, building the knowledge and story of the data together, which brings together Indigenous and western methods of interviewing (Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2009; Heyl, 2001; Bishop, 1997). We were able to navigate interviews and debrief together, which enhanced the deeply respectful data collection and analysis. With these methodological approaches, participants are asked a question and can direct a story towards the question, therefore, we prepared prompts for responses (Have you thought about your burial? Have you considered a green burial?) and received clarifying inquiries from the participants, thereby co-creating an understanding of their perspectives.

We conducted 20 exploratory, semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 140 minutes, with an average of 94 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. The participants ranged in age from 60 to 88 years. There were six in their 60s, nine were in their 70s, and five were in their 80s. Eleven participants were women. All

but one of the environmentalists were white. All participants lived in Kansas at the time of the interview. Most were born in Kansas and those who were not had spent many years living and working in eastern Kansas.

Analysis

We employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) to identify, analyse and report themes from the data. First, after each interview, we debriefed and assessed the interviews and the information. We took notes throughout the data collection and used these as initial descriptive codes and areas for additional exploration across the data. Once we received the transcripts, we read them and generated a list of codes that label and describe the data. We coded the data separately and met to resolve coding decisions through discussion and exploration of each other's perspectives. These conversations revealed the long engagement with environmentalism embedded in values and activism through their involvement in religious affiliations, social movements, family traditions, and place across their lifetimes (Dennis & Stock, 2019). We sorted the coded data into broader themes and defined and named the themes and how these fit into broader understanding of their considerations of death care.

Results

We identified three main themes that collectively describe the older adult environmentalists' perspectives on their death care deliberations. These themes include: a) Cremation, b) Donating the Body to Science, and c) Green Burials. (Only one couple had settled on being embalmed and buried in the family plot.) The themes are described in detail below, along with illustrative quotations edited to remove utterances for readability and clarity.

Cremation

The environmentalists talked about cremation with varying motivations. One stated, “Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. I mean it’s part of going back. It’s a faster process of going back to the earth.” Her husband has been cremated and placed in the following:

> It’s a wonderful columbarium. It’s beautifully made. The front of it is like brass and has wheat. And [his] ashes are there. And so, I bought the little compartment...where he is. And so that's where I will be also. (E10)

Having a marked place was important for this couple. She stated further:

> But what is also important is having a historical place because my husband was very interested in genealogy…and his dad before him (i.e., the Mayflower connection).[4]

Similarly, with regard to having places of significance, one man described how his ashes will be divided and spread on the ranch where he grew up, his hometown, and a spiritual centre, thus leaving himself at places that were of great importance to him (E1). Others, who have also moved away from their homes of origin, were indecisive about where their ashes would be placed. One man stated clearly that he does not want his body embalmed and was currently entertaining the idea of cremation or green burial.

> I have a family cemetery… There was a [family] plot …. My dad's buried actually in part [of it]. My mom will be next to him. There's not additional parcels for us. I guess I could have my ashes there… It's a place issue. It's a lineage issue but it's also. . . environmental…I just know I need to be out somewhere. I'm not attached to wanting a place for me… I just want to be back out in the earth. (E15)

Similarly, for others who have moved around, cremation was a familiar option. One woman stated, “Yeah, we’ll both be cremated . . . kind of the family tradition, for one. We’re not tied to any place….” Her parents moved around throughout their life and, thus, when they died at different times they were disposed of where they died as opposed to the same place. She shared:

> …he loved going up to the mountains. So, he’s kind of just spread out on the mountains …. My mom lived…in [a senior community]… And so we just walked out behind [the buildings], where she used to like to look and just spread her ashes there. I don’t really care. I don’t really know. (E12)

Her husband stated it more directly and with a different motivation, when asked he said, “Yeah, we're getting fried, and spread on the earth.” When asked if there was a particular place, he responded, “You know, I've never thought about that”. While indecisive about place, this participant shared a dissatisfaction with having a public funeral ritual of any kind, which he referred to as “the worst damn thing in the world.” Likewise, he and another man both shared that viewing the dead body was unappealing and cremation helped to avoid that discomfort. This other participant will also carry on his family tradition and his ashes will be placed in the cemetery where many generations of his family are buried. He was also able to bridge cremation with green burial concepts with his parents’ ashes. He shared that while:

> …probably unusual in this day and age, but when my mom and dad were both in either a biodegradable [box] or an urn, I buried them personally… So, after the graveside service, I dug the hole and buried the thing myself. So, I don’t know what will happen when I'm

> gone. Some arrangement will be made but that's something a little different. But I think it's what happens to the soul that's more important than what happens to the body. (E4)

While some of the couples were in agreement on their death care arrangements, one woman compromised with her husband while making plans. She would have preferred to have her ashes scattered. She shared:

> And I thought it just seems ridiculous to use more space. . . . And my husband wasn't very excited about it and of course he doesn't have to have done the same thing I have done. So, he really wants a spot at the cemetery, but agrees that being cremated is okay. (E2)

Another environmentalist was concerned about the space used for burials. He stated:

> I intend to be cremated because it's not environmentally correct to occupy a space. It's a little—I don't know. What's the right word? Too American? Too arrogant, something, say, "Yeah, I need [to be in] a fucking box for the next 15,000 years". (E14)

Alternatively, the sisters' shared residence includes a cemetery on the convent grounds. All of them presumed they would be cremated. One said, "I'm asking to be cremated and buried. I'll probably choose my urn". However, after we introduced green burials they may re-evaluate.

Donating Body to Science

Another participant was considering donating his body to science and considered cremation and the final placement of his ashes:

> … But I would plan to be cremated later. And for a long period of time, I thought, yeah, I don't need a tombstone anywhere. My wife is leaning a little bit more towards a tombstone, so we each have a plot next to my parents, so we can put two urns in one plot. (E16)

Along with the participant just mentioned (E16), two participants planned on donating their body to science. This was also a tradition in their families. One woman shared:

> I'm going to have the science. That's what my granny did, too. Yes. I don't think that's very green; they burn you at the end…I hope they just cremate you. (E3)

Within one couple, each made a different death care choice. His wife was cremated and buried in her family cemetery out of state. He shared that he will donate his body to science as "a last gift." He elaborates further, "Well, [my father] gave his body to [science]. And mine is designated that way too. . . When they do what they do, you're cremated anyway."

While a couple of participants did not have definitive plans, their discourses resembled the others when discussing place and their remains as a gift regardless of death care option.

Green Burials

Green burials were known to a few of the environmentalists. One woman was particularly knowledgeable about local green burials:

> I don't have family close by, and I'm sure [my brother] would [come], without a doubt. I don't want to bother them. I told my family . . . that this is where I will be buried. I am

> very well aware of the fact that… Lawrence [KS] is the only municipality in the entire country which has a green burial option. I don't know how many people really know that.

She offered insights into the process of securing and using a plot in the cemetery and her own motivations for choosing this option:

> It costs a little money. You not only have to pay for the site, which is . . . some hundred dollars but then you also need to pay for the city to dig. I experienced that, step-by-step [through a friend's death], and I therefore decided that this is what I wanted, this is where I wanted to be, and this is the place I wanted to be. I asked my friends in [my spiritual group] if they would tend to the details. I was moved to tears. They were ecstatic. They will see me back into the Earth. I am so deeply joyful at the idea that I will be turned into good earth and perhaps be useful to insects, worms and plants that will be using that Earth. (E6)

For participants who have moved around the country and live away from their families of origin, like any death care option, tough decisions have to be made about where the final resting place will be. While this participant will not be buried in the family cemetery, she has found comfort in her decision to have an environmentally-friendly burial supported by her local community:

> It's a *great* burden to have—I'm not going to be with my family. That's what I really had to realise . . . The hardest thing is for me not to be with my [family]. My [chosen community, or] family is here most of the time, and a green burial is really so wonderful, because it returns you. I've learned that cremation is very bad for the environment; sends bad chemicals into the air . . . . I don't know, people may wrap me in some kind of

> cotton. …I'm interested in being with the worms. . . . I just think it'll be great, good company. (E6)

Another participant had participated in green burials previously. He shared intimate knowledge of the green burial process in this community:

> Well, I've been involved with several green burials . . . And the last person, [Name], it was actually kind of cool. We worked with…a social worker I believe…We directed everything. The family and friends did everything. [He] died in the hospital—we came and we got him and we put him on dry ice. We did it in his garage, and then we took him out to the cemetery in the back of a truck. [He was in] a cardboard cremation box and then we—because we were worried about the dry ice getting the box soggy. . . we left it on a door. It's what we had the box sitting on. It didn't quite fit into the back of the pickup so he went on an angle. But his head was up and I was in the back, and I kind of gave him his final tour of Lawrence coming back over there.

Furthermore, he was aware of his rights to bury himself however he chose:

> And my understanding about all that is that if you look at the letter of the law, you can bury yourself pretty much anywhere you want. And so, my hope is that I'll just quietly get buried out here somewhere on [my] land, and someone will plant a tree on top of me and that will be it. (E11)

Another environmentalist had heard of a story of a green burial and negotiations to release the body to the family, not to a funeral home. He shared:

> It's hard for them to get the body from the hospital but they finagle this somehow and throw in the back of this big station wagon… headed out to the turnpike going to Kansas City, realised, "Make sure her feet are covered." They throw a blanket to make sure her feet were covered…They get through that fine, go to Kansas City and this is an industrial area part of …downtown along the river somewhere there is this cremation place. And they back up [to] the loading dock . . . because they're not used to having people drive in [to the crematory].

He also describes an informal green burial on private land with the following:

> [A] dear friend [died] just two months ago… Anyway, he got cancer in his later years. . . [he] said, "I just want, just my body buried." …They talked it all through and …while he's sort of dying and still lucid they…dug the hole…they were joking about it and then a few days later he passed, and he was pitched in and covered up and it was legal, although not completely, I guess, but he did it. (E15)

One sister shared that when asked about her death care preferences she told them, "Well, I'm not sure of cremation but I've heard about an eco-burial" (N1). After we discussed the known options for green burials, she stated:

> I'll have to look into that. We are buried in some kind of a box. They're certainly the cheapest thing we can find. . . . . So, they're probably made out of plywood or something, covered with a grave cloth.

These sisters seem to have a desire and have made casket choices that minimise the impact on the earth. Another sister shared her burial plans:

> So, I just got approval, my mother's gonna be buried here. And I'll be buried here. We'll both be cremated. . . . Yeah, I think my brother and my sister and her husband are going in [one of those pod things] definitely. . . . But I haven't talked to [the other sisters] about that. Cremation's pretty new. There's only four sisters cremated up there. (N4)

The Catholic sisters provided refuge to Guatemalan families who fled the civil war in the 1980s. One shared the burial story of one of the family members:

> You think of how the Indians and the people were buried in the past. And these Guatemalan [families] that came, the grandmother died of that group . . . And so [she] was buried in our cemetery out here. So . . . the hole was dug, and they just had her in a blanket like they do in Guatemala, and they just lowered her down on some boards. . . that's as green as you can get…We did it once, we need to do it again. (N2)

We had a discussion of the green burial that had taken place at the convent. The sisters were interested in green burials for themselves, but had not connected, before our conversation, the Guatemalan burial as opening the possibility of green burials in their own cemetery claiming it was not possible. They concluded they would take it up at their next meeting.

Another participant had heard of green burials but had not investigated the options more fully. Alternatively, his wife (E12) had not heard of green burials. He and his wife mentioned they would be cremated, but also shared this exchange considering his options:

> I've considered that. Maybe more green than you think. There's a guy I'm reading about and…I was reading about the worms that eat you when you're dead. . . And this one guy

> wanted to be buried that way, but with worms and the coyotes and stuff eat him, and he had it all planned for a friend to take him in the back forty and drop him. That would be my idea of a green burial. I'd be for that.

We shared information about the local green burial plot and he asked with surprise, “Here in Lawrence? Right here in the backyard? . . . [B]ut, they're still putting you in the ground, right?” (E13).

Discovering the options and overcoming the misconceptions about the legalities and rights of burial were mentioned with others who were choosing cremation but may consider other options. When asked if he had considered a green burial, one participant shared:

> No. I figured that cremation was at least reducing my remains. I don’t know if the cemetery in [nearby town] would accept that. I’ve never heard of anybody doing it. (E16)

Only one participant found the green burial site as an unappealing option deciding on cremation instead:

> We actually looked at the place out at the cemetery and it’s just so messy. I mean I guess that’s green, you kind of wish they kind of tidied it up a little bit…it’s not very attractive at this point. (E2)

These older adults, whether choosing a green burial or not, offered reflections on their choices that covered the importance of place, family and faith traditions as well as their identities as environmentalists. In the discussion, we tackle what these considerations mean theoretically.

Discussion

Returning to our main questions in this paper: Do environmental beliefs and practices extend to death care choices? How might we explain older adult environmentalists' thoughts on how and where their bodies will be disposed? Do they contemplate what kind of carbon footprint death care option create? Or is their thinking influenced more by family tradition? Is there a gap between one's environmental identity and one's deliberations about death care? How do their discourses influence our distinctions between disposal and dispersal?

Our interpretation of whether these environmentalists' death care discourse represents continuity of their environmentalism hinges upon their motivations and justifications. For many in our cohort, their death care decisions remain open, yet, their deliberations reflect important environmental discourse related to the importance of place, their bodily remains as a gift, and the political activism involved in these choices, particularly those leaning towards green burials. Their discourse reflected expressions of autonomy or a chance to reinforce their symbolic immortality.

For the three set on typical burials, their discourse aligns with other traditions that seem to retain stronger resonance in their lives than their environmentalism with one choosing a military funeral (which does not preclude cremation) and the couple that will be buried traditionally. Even then, their choice reflects a sense of gift in that they are honouring family tradition and the family knows where they can visit.

As Kejizer (2017) has shown, cremation is a marginally greener option compared to typical burials. For our participants, though, from their perspective, overwhelmingly their discourse aligns with their environmental engagement by choosing cremation or green burial. These offer the participants more control and they limit the influence of the business of formal

death care practices. The participants have been active in a variety of social movements across their lifetimes (Dennis & Stock, 2019). Their political and social values are reinforced with having full agency over how and where their bodies will be disposed or dispersed. They are able to privilege the intimacy of carrying out their wishes through their friends and loved ones who enact their values of minimizing the effect on the environment.

For those choosing cremation (over 50 percent), their discourse illuminates a variety of concerns. For some it strikes them as the easiest in terms of planning for those living, a way to conserve land, and an easy way to be distributed geographically to their favourite places (Casal et al., 2010; Hockey et al., 2011). While Kjeizer (2017) points to the headstone as one of the most significant ecosystem costs, our respondents disagreed over the relevance of having one. But the choice of place, regardless of marker, remained an expression of values. Two of the respondents focused explicitly on land conservation as justifications for cremation, supporting Kelly (2015) and Kjeizer (2017).

For those reflecting on green burials, their discourse was not overwhelmingly *more* environmental than the others. Most noticeable in our interviews, was an unequal knowledge about green burial as an option—even with the local cemetery in the vanguard. Even the nuns, who had conducted (or minimally condoned) a green burial, honoured the Guatemalan ways and never thought to disrupt the ways "we" do it. The nuns' reluctance to embrace the kind of burial they offered the Guatemalan grandmother as something available to themselves reflects the power of the business of death and burials discussed by Mitford (1963) and others since. While connected in multiple ways with one another for various eco-concerns, the accessibility and re-emergence of green burials had not filtered through this cohort of environmentalists.

For most, the ability to reflect on what will be their last public-facing act, most of these activists see a continuity of their quiet activism that allows them a chance to enjoy a measure of symbolic immortality in their later years of life. For some, this meant enjoying the knowledge that friends willingly and gladly agreed to carry out their green burial wishes. For others that meant being at peace that via cremation their body would return to the earth in the form of a gift (Rumble et al., 2014, p. 252). A few focused on the political autonomy embedded within a green burial. The ability to coordinate every intimate detail of a friend's death care including retrieval from the morgue, washing the body, transportation, plot digging, and the laying of the body into the ground and any funeral rites represented a powerful ownership of the process. Almost all of them, while reflecting on their burial deliberations, even if their minds were not made up, made overtures that they recognised what an important choice it was both for how they saw themselves, but what it meant for those left behind (Murcott, 2012). In fact, the one respondent who actively disliked the local green cemetery area because it lacked tidiness also matched previous research (Davies & Rumble, 2012) because the unkemptness might embarrass family that might visit (Goffman, 1956).

Our research, we recognise, also influenced those we spoke with, especially those that were unfamiliar with green burials (Bishop, 1997; Heyl, 2001). On one hand this was a limitation, but it may also be an opening to revisiting the conversations later. On a few occasions, we interviewed married couples which probably influenced their reflections. Many were still uncertain and enjoyed the new possibilities we offered. A study requesting death care reflections at various times could be a helpful contribution.

While Rumble et al. (2014) debate whether people want to be disposed of (kept separate from the living) or dispersed (reintegrated as a gift), the discourse of our older adults reflects a

cohort that has lived through societal upheaval (Dennis & Stock, 2019). While their environmental discourse leans towards support for using the language of dispersal their specific words and consideration reflect an openness to new ideas, struggle with the importance of place, and the challenges posed by family tradition. Many expressed the importance of defining their eventual death care selections as a gift to family that survive, the worms and soil, or a significant decision that honours their life as an environmentalists. In this way, their discourse reflects a nuance that goes beyond the dichotomy of disposal or dispersal. Further, the spiritual (mostly Christian) underpinning of these activists reflects a sensibility beyond getting rid of the body even if intonated with notions of gift implied in dispersal. We question whether dispersal is the appropriate terminology or if it is simply an alliteration that sounds nice to death scholars, but may not reflect the on the ground (or in the ground, in some instances) reality.

In all, these environmentalists' discourses of what to do with their bodies following death offered reflections on their lives as activists, though mostly of a quiet nature, as well as a life lived through tumultuous social change (Dennis & Stock, 2019; Haenfler et al., 2012; Pottinger, 2017). Most of these people have lived through, both the entrenchment of what we describe as typical burial practices as well as the (re)emergence of green burials now enshrouded in a language of environmentalism, sustainability, and conservation. Their discourse reflects a pursuit of symbolic immortality—deliberations that make sense in their lived self and identities as they move closer to their own death. But it does point out to us as scholars that we have many avenues open to us for study that go beyond just the large-scale global problems, and that our own communities and even families (Jamieson, 2019), are filled with stories of people wrestling with environmental issues on an everyday basis, waiting to be researched and told.

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[1] The majority of this paper was conceived, researched, and written prior to the global pandemic of 2019-2020 that upended so many traditions and practices around death, burial and grieving.
[2] Cryonic suspension would seem to be a problematic death care choice environmentally. While unmentioned by anyone in our study, the freezing (of all or part of one's dead body in the hopes of the emergence of technology capable of reanimating one back to life) of their body via the interminable maintenance and surveillance might consist of a large carbon footprint (Shoffstall, 2010).
[3] It should be noted that some are looking to offer renewable energy credits to crematoria while admitting that the idea examines "the morbid topic of the use of the human body past its expiration date" (Michalska, 2018, p. 990).
[4] In the United States those with a "Mayflower connection" claim esteem as connected to some of the original colonising families.