Displaying Self: Memorialisation in Contemporary Society

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Research Highlights

- Contemporary memorials may be categorised as traditional (e.g. the gravestone), contemporary established (e.g. the now commonplace roadside memorials), or emerging (e.g. the fast growing use of digital forms and online memorial sites); these forms co-exist, including contemporary adaptations of traditional forms and several modes may be used in commemorating one individual.

- Memorialising processes are less documented than memorial forms but there is evidence that these are intensely personalised. However, most research is confined to the occasion of the funeral and immediate aftermath of the death and scant attention is paid to the ongoing functions of memorialisation, its relationship with grief, or to diversity and difference.

- Traditional and public memorials may be used as the site or occasion for personal private behaviours.

- Ritual remains significant in contemporary memorialisation but is distinguished by the imbuing of traditional rituals with personal touches as well as employment of unique personal and family rituals.

- Identity is a significant theme and spans personal relationships in life as well as social status and networks after death.

- Places and spaces are recurring motifs across physical, virtual, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions.

- Memorials set up in the wake of and at the sites of natural disasters and other traumatic events causing mass or several deaths are a significant and escalating phenomenon which touches on all of the above dimensions and combines personal, public, spontaneous, planned, formal and informal elements.

- Ritual and identity may be reinforced along traditional cultural lines among migrant communities where dislocation of place and space is felt in death.

- While many features of postmodernism are characterised by their transitory and impermanent nature, contemporary memorialisation shows an interesting trend towards the enduring and permanent.

- Secularisation is highlighted as a significant feature of contemporary memorialisation but there is a lack of critical appraisal of what this constitutes and how it continues to interface with contemporary expressions of spirituality or use of religious tradition.

- The distinguishing feature of contemporary memorialisation is its employment in personal meaning-making. While the need to find meaning in death is not a new phenomenon, it is the trend towards the creation of personal meaning rather than the taking of meaning from traditional and socially prescribed forms and practices which governs the shaping of memorialisation today.
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Executive Summary

1 Purpose and scope
The survey was undertaken as part of the Remember Me. The Changing Face of Memorialisation research project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (www.hull.ac.uk/rememberme). The purpose of this survey was to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on memorialisation from the mid-twentieth century to the present in order to:

(i) provide a comparison with archaeological and historical themes and trends identified in the companion survey, and
(ii) embed the project’s contemporary in-depth case studies in established themes and enrich their articulation with key questions and developing trends.

2 Method
Extensive searches of the academic, popular and grey literature and internet sources were conducted. An immediate methodological problem emerged in that much of the literature intertwines the different topics and processes belonging to the aftermath of death; there is relatively little focus on memorialisation as a distinct process. Thus of 423 sources initially identified, only 171 are incorporated in this review on the grounds of their more substantial treatment of memorials and memorialising processes. Some significant sub-topics are briefly reviewed but given full coverage in other reports from the Remember Me study. These include photography, memorialisation arising from armed conflict and migration. Coding and analysis were guided by the Remember Me overarching research questions. The review is divided into two main sections: Memorial Forms and Memorialising Processes.

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1 See Deep in Time: meaning and mnemonic in archaeological and diaspora studies of death, Yvonne Inall and Malcolm Lillie
2 See The photograph as vehicle for mourning and remembering, Xxx and Liz Nicol
3 See Heroes and loved ones; death arising from armed combat, Michael Drake and Miroslava Hukelova
4 See Countries old and new: memorialisation among Polish migrants in Hull. Lisa Dikomitis and Marcin Biernat
3 Memorial Forms

Three sub-divisions of memorial forms used today are suggested, although it should be noted that they co-exist and overlap.

**Traditional memorials**, including gravestones and other markers in cemeteries, war memorials, other public monuments, and various forms of private memorial or shrine maintained in the home, including keeping the ashes. These sites are the focus for private and public behaviours and may be regularly refreshed. They embody emotion, the social and relationship status of the deceased and may be used by the bereaved to determine how they wish the person to be remembered. All forms of public memorial frequently contain a political or moral message and may be the subject of contention. Memorial donations provide an active engagement for all mourners, and though traditional, are increasing as a form of tribute to the deceased combined with support of a cause associated with the deceased’s life or death.

**Contemporary established forms** are those which have emerged over the late modern period so as to become commonly adopted types. These include memorial trees and benches, roadside memorials and ghost bikes. They are intensely personalised and/or belong to a particular group or community. Spontaneous and grass-roots memorials represent a now established trend and may occur at the site of a roadside accident or other tragic event, including those involving several or mass deaths such as a natural disaster. Mass displays of flowers and personal messages are common after the deaths of celebrities, the public reaction to the death of Diana Princess of Wales being acknowledged as a watershed phenomenon. As with traditional forms, these new forms are the site or vehicle for mourning behaviours and some writers suggest that these practices represent a desire to develop new forms of ritualised mourning as old rituals prove inadequate for modern needs.

**Emerging forms** are those which are continuing to develop at a rapid pace, in both form and function. Predominant in this category is the use of the internet and social media with the creation of web cemeteries, memorial pages and continuing Facebook identities for individuals now deceased. Commentators suggest that the ever-growing popularity of internet memorials is due to its accessibility to a wide range of mourners, its function as a virtual support group for the bereaved, its capacity to foster a sense of continuing connection and the ease with which memories can be shared, including on significant dates and anniversaries, such as birthdays. However, significant conflicts and concerns are also emerging, principally concerning ownership of the deceased’s identity and memory. There may be conflict between friends and family concerning the representation of the deceased; the phenomenon of ‘stranger mourner’ is little understood and may cause offence; trolling and spam activity are proving difficult to control and add a negative dimension and unwanted intrusion.
The camera phone is an important element in the use of the internet and in its own right, with the ‘funeral selfie’ providing both immediacy and a chronological marker. Photos taken on a personal mobile phone and then shared through social media exemplify the blurring of the public and the private as an intimate memorial is publicly displayed.

Memorial tattoos are growing in popularity but are more correctly seen as a resurgence of an ancient tradition. They are notable in the contemporary context for their permanence, an indelible marker of grief which encapsulates a continuing bond with the deceased.

4 Memorialising Processes
The literature tends to conflate discussion of memorial practices and emotional, behavioural and spiritual processes around a focus on the funeral and other events surrounding the death. By contrast, there is relatively little on the ongoing process of memorialisation (with the exception of the treatment of the ashes). The review highlighted four major themes, each with significant sub-topics, which are themselves interconnected.

**Identity**, with its extensively explored subtopics of personal, social and cultural, and multiple and contested identities, emerges as a key aspect of contemporary memorialisation. The laying down of the distinct personal identity of the deceased can be seen as a continuation of the life-centred funeral, the identity reflected and reinforced through objects, symbols and other evokers of memory as well as the telling and re-telling of personal stories and construction of narratives. Equally important, and impinging on the personal identity of the individual, are the social networks within which they operated and the relationships and social status which they held in life. Culture, social class and identity following migration are highlighted as important influencers. Across these various life domains, therefore, the several and simultaneous identities of the deceased open up the potential for disagreement and contention amongst the bereaved as to how the deceased is to be remembered and their life and death commemorated.

**Relational aspects** stem inevitably from the social identity of the deceased and some authors argue that at its heart memorialisation is inevitably concerned with continuing and renegotiating relationships between the living and the dead. Memorialisation, it is suggested, allows for the social identity of the deceased to persist and their social agency to continue into life as well as for the bereaved to maintain bonds with the deceased. A considerable body of literature considers how memorials and memorialisation practices facilitate grief although there is also the potential for conflict between mourners, insensitivity on the part of social institutions and cultural dissonance to aggravate distress and complicate the grieving process.
Ritual and symbolism span the different events and processes in the aftermath of death. It is a core feature of memorialisation influencing both the construction of the memorial and the ensuing memorialising behaviours and practices. Memorials may be seen as the markers of the ritualised transition from life to death and the relationship between the living and the dead. The earliest literature reviewed suggests a dearth of (meaningful) ritual but later research is keen to detail the richness and diversity of ritual around death in the twenty-first century. The significant feature of this, however, is the need for wider socio-cultural affirmation alongside the incorporation of private, informal rituals and symbols. There is some evidence that traditional rituals are being re-interpreted, adapted and enacted.

Secularisation, contemporary spirituality and religion are given relatively sparse attention as a whole, although there are numerous scattered references to the impact and influence of secularisation on ceremony and ritual, particularly in the funeral. Broadly speaking, religion is posited as a traditional meta-narrative which postmodern societies have discarded in favour of individualised, customised responses to death in a secular context. Some writers question whether this has led to a dearth of wider meanings but only a handful of sources consider the articulation of contemporary understandings of spirituality with the management of death and this is barely developed to consider the role and function of spirituality in contemporary memorialisation.

5 Conclusion
The literature provides a rich descriptive account of memorial forms but less attention to memorialising processes, particularly its ongoing nature after the funeral and immediate aftermath of the death. Other gaps relate to systematic analysis of socio-cultural diversity; secularism, spirituality and religion; the relationship between grief and memorialisation. Traditional, modern and emerging forms co-exist in a fluid and dynamic relationship and it is this which accounts for the changing face of memorialisation. However, the distinguishing feature of contemporary memorialisation is its employment in personal meaning-making. While the need to find meaning in death is not a new phenomenon, it is the trend towards the creation of personal meaning rather than the taking of meaning from traditional and socially prescribed forms and practices which governs the shaping of memorialisation today.