From the holdings of the Department of Special Collections , Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ

These documents are either in the public domain, or can only be used for educational and research purposes (Fair use) as per U.S. Copyright law (text below). By accessing this file, all users agree that their use falls in the public domain or within fair use as defined by the copyrightlaw. We do not charge any permission or usage fees for the publication of images of material inour collections, including those provided by Princeton University Library, via our website, catalog, or directly from staff.For more information regarding copyright, credit, and citation please review the information onthe Copyright, Credit and Citation Guidelines page of our website.
https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/policies/copyright-credit-and-citation-guidelines. If you have any questions, including how to order higher-quality images from the collection, contact Special Collections Public Services via our Ask Us! Form. https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/ask-us

---

Doctoral Dissertations, 2011-2026 Anthropology

2023

Life After Death in New York City: An Ethnography of Public Administration

Pinedo-Padoch, Sofia

Princeton, NJ : Princeton University

---

http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp012z10wt47p

U.S. Copyright law: The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, §108, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of fair use that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve a violation of copyright law. https://www.copyright.gov/title17/title17.pdf

LIFE AFTER DEATH IN NEW YORK CITY:

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Sofia Pinedo-Padoch

A DISSERTATION

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY

OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE

BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Advisers: Carol Greenhouse, João Biehl

May 2023

© Copyright by Sofia Pinedo-Padoch, 2023. All rights reserved.

Abstract

When someone dies intestate and without close family willing to administer their estate in New York City, the Public Administrator (PA), a small state agency, steps in to take care of the estate. It is the PA's responsibility to lay the decedent's body to rest, to look for family, to settle any legal matters, and to collect, liquidate, and distribute their assets. Based on two years of fieldwork with the PA, this dissertation examines the process of state-led estate administration while also looking at the lives and deaths of the PA's decedents. The dissertation is concerned with both sides of this work: the knowledge-making practices of the administration process, and the intimate and incomplete stories of the dead that are visible through the work of the state.

The PA's work is depicted as a kind of storytelling shaped by formal and informal narratives that circulate among coworkers and their publics. Although formal narratives in the shape of official reports and court documents are, to an outsider, the only "visible" evidence of narrative-making, this evidence is shaped by the informal narratives constructed by coworkers. The more possessions of market value a decedent has, the more substantial their narrative. Market value is directly linked to the storied life. This dissertation examines the consequences of this insight and argues that the PA's legal narratives are primarily *material.* The dissertation also argues that the convergence of different temporalities and temporal rhythms in the PA's work produces the distinctive material afterlives of the dead.

The dissertation argues that the work of estate administration requires a level of emotional distance to be sustainable for its practitioners. Rather than "indifferent," PA employees practice a state of "limited caring" in relation to decedents. This argument is positioned against the cases made by scholars who have argued that bureaucracy is "stupid" and a kind of "violence." Finally, the case of a famous decedent is examined, a case that turned the assumptions of the PA's work upside down. By attending to the ethnographic details of the PA's work, this dissertation proposes a new approach to the study of bureaucracy.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements …… 5

Note on Pseudonyms …… 7

Preface …… 8

Introduction …… 19

Chapter 1: Time After Death …… 41

Chapter 2: Narratives as Ethnography …… 80

Chapter 3: Destruction and Hoarding …… 117

Chapter 4: When Death Gets Personal …… 156

Chapter 5: Cecil …… 192

Conclusion: *And yet...* …… 219

Appendix A: A Technical Overview …… 226

Appendix B: Estate Administration and its Cast of Characters: A Guide …… 237

Figure 1: Standard Investigation Report …… 241

Figure 2: Judicial Settlement of Account Proceeding Checklist …… 242

Works Cited …… 249

List of Prior Publications and Presentations of Dissertation Material …… 255

Acknowledgements

As an undergraduate at Swarthmore College, I loved my very first class, "Ethnography: Theory and Practice" with Farha Ghannam. It was in that class that I wrote my first ethnography of New York City. Farha advised me on my senior thesis and helped me apply to graduate school. I am very grateful to her. If I hadn't loved her courses so much, I wouldn't be where I am today.

I had spent two perfectly fine years at the DA's office before Rick Buckheit came to Rackets and made work a real joy. Rick became a friend, a mentor, someone to gossip with, and someone I adored working for. I moved on from the DA's Office, I moved on from the MTA IG's Office, I went to graduate school – but I guess what I really wanted was to work with Rick again, because that's where I ended up. You made this research possible, Rick. I am so grateful to you. Come back from Florida, we miss your lawyer cookies.

That brings me to my colleagues at the Public Administrator's Office. The names in this dissertation: Pablo, Mohammed, Maria, Saeed, Quentin, and Carol. Thank you for being so willing to have me along on investigations, to tell me your stories, to work together in the office. Thank you, especially, to Pablo and Mohammed, with whom I spent the most time. Sometimes the work was rough, but I was so lucky to work alongside the two of you. And thank you, also, to Maria, for your companionship.

My advisor Carol Greenhouse guided me through my writing in the most thoughtful and generous way. She read through my (very rough) writing when I was just back from the field, and encouraged me to write my very first chapter, on Cecil Taylor. I want to thank Carol for always giving me feedback that made me feel excited to do the work, to think about what I had seen and felt in the field. I am also grateful to João Biehl for his stimulating classes and conversations. I want to thank João for reading through several versions of my chapters and for his thoughtful feedback. Finally, I want to thank my two readers, Ryo Morimoto and Lisa Davis. Thank you Lisa for your feedback on earlier versions of dissertation chapters, and for our conversations. And thank you Ryo for your help, your honesty, and sense of humor. You made my return from the field so much easier, and it was a joy to be your TA.

At Princeton, I also want to thank Abdellah Hammoudi for teaching me to think in unusual ways about unusual texts. *A Season in Mecca* is one of my favorite ethnographies of all time, and it continues to inspire my writing. I feel very lucky to have been your student. I am also thankful to Carol Zanca for helping with absolutely *everything*.

I am so fortunate to have been part of such a wonderful cohort. I am particularly grateful to my dear friends Lindsay Ofrias and Thalia Gigerenzer, who have been there to support me personally, academically, and in all other ways, from the beginning of graduate school. I also want to thank Vinicius Furuie and honorary cohort member Mauricio Matsumoto – the Brazilians – for their friendship and intellectual companionship. I am grateful, also, to the other members of our writing group, who helped me jumpstart my dissertation writing: Sarah-Jane Koulen, Kessie Alexandre, Allie Middleton, and Benji Fogarty. And thank you to my good friends, the excellent anthropologists Sebastian Ramírez Hernández, Pablo Landa, and Nikos Michailidis.

Thank you to my brilliant, creative, energetic husband Daniel Jodocy, whom I met just as I was beginning my fieldwork. Thank you to our son, Oscar Jaroslaw, only 16 months old and already a great personality and percussionist. And finally, дякую and gracias to my parents, Christine Padoch and Miguel Pinedo-Vasquez, who gave me the anthropology gene.

My preliminary research was funded by Princeton's Program in American Studies, the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studied (PIIRS), and the Department of East Asian Studies. My dissertation fieldwork was funded by the National Science Foundation's Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant. My dissertation writing was funded by the Charlotte Newcombe Fellowship through the Institute of Citizens and Scholars. I presented early versions of sections of this dissertation in conferences of the American Anthropological Association, the American Ethnological Society, the Medical Anthropology Network of the European Association for Social Anthropologists, and at a workshop on Material Temporalities at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.

Note on Pseudonyms

Apart from Cecil Taylor and the late poet Steve Dalachinsky, the names of all individuals in this dissertation have been changed. The names of neighborhoods and the borough in which I conducted research, Brooklyn, have remained the same.

Preface

When someone dies without a will (intestate) and with no one qualified to administer their estate in New York City, the Public Administrator's Office, a small state agency, steps in to take care of the body and the decedent's[1] assets. It is the Public Administrator's responsibility to lay the decedent's body to rest, to look for family, to take their place in pending legal matters, and to collect, liquidate, and distribute their assets.[2]

The PA's office sits in the basement of a drab court building in New York City. It is open to the eyes of the public via a long plexiglass window in the front.

I spent several years working with Public Administrator, beginning in the summer of 2015 and ending in early 2019 (as much as fieldwork can really "end"). Over that time as the PA's "anthropologist/intern," I had many different jobs. I sorted through and organized the contents of the vault – decedents' jewelry and art waiting to be appraised and auctioned off. I spent many frustrating hours on the phone trying to close the million-dollar investment accounts of wealthy decedents. I filed case folders that contained intimate things like high school diplomas, wedding photos, and Christmas cards. Finally, I frequently accompanied investigators to decedents' homes.[3]

These excursions could be exciting, dull, nauseating, puzzling, fun, and exhausting. They took me and my colleagues to sparsely decorated apartments, Single

[1] "Decedents" are what the dead are called at the PA's office. Each decedent has an "estate." These estates are also referred to as "cases."
[2] The PA's work is done by their in-house staff with the assistance of contractors and other city agencies.
[3] The PA's Office staff includes a commissioner, their deputy, case managers, investigators, bookkeepers, an office manager, and a property manager. During my fieldwork the staff included 13 full-time employees. Though some employees shared the same title, they often had different specialties. More details about the roles of PA employees can be found in Appendices A and B.

Resident Occupancy buildings, spectacular Victorian-style mansions, and homes so overloaded with stuff you could not even get inside.

Throughout all these excursions and the office work, I saw my colleagues, representatives of the State, handle the most intimate details of deceased New Yorkers' lives with care. And yet no matter how much care they and we took, I could not kick a creeping sense of unease that returned periodically during my fieldwork. It is the PA's striking, sometimes disorienting and disturbing, combination of the bureaucratic and the intimate that I explore in my dissertation.

Bill was the head of the office. His official title was the Public Administrator, a position that came with the rank of New York State commissioner. He had been my boss years earlier when I worked as a paralegal at the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. Bill and I had a good working relationship then and became friends. When I left my post as a paralegal, he helped me find a new job. When I applied to graduate school, I wrote about the prosecutorial experiences that we had shared.

After finishing my first year of graduate coursework, I moved back home to New York City for the summer, hoping to conduct exploratory research at a prosecutor's office – maybe with the District Attorney or with the State Attorney General. Neither of these offices, however, were comfortable with having me, an anthropologist, around. My contacts in both places expressed hesitation about my confused allegiances – would I be working for them or for my university? Would my allegiance be to the prosecutors or to my critical, academic perspective? Would I be more like an employee, or like a journalist looking for an exposé? These questions also worried the government officials and prosecutors I approached in Singapore, where I was also considering fieldwork. I knew

that doing ethnographic research in a State office was going to be difficult, but I began to worry that it would be impossible.

Bill had recently left the DA's Office to become the Public Administrator. He and I met for lunch that first summer and we talked about his new job. It felt like old times. We agreed that I would work as an intern at the PA's office in exchange for research access. Bill suggested I try it out for a month and see how it felt.

I was initially drawn to the ethnographic study of bureaucratic legal contexts because of the work I had done as Bill's paralegal at the Manhattan DA's Office. Dubbed "Signalgate,"[4] the case focused on Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) subway signal and switch inspectors who had been regularly falsifying their inspection records.[5] With the assistance of the MTA Inspector General's Office, Bill and I analyzed inspection records to determine the extent of employees' falsifications. We found that almost everyone was falsifying their records. But we could not charge the entire department with a felony, because there would be no inspectors left – this was simply not an option. So, instead, we identified the ten worst abusers in the department and our office ended up indicting them. This was an unsatisfying conclusion to the case, because the inspectors who were indicted had largely been reacting to the unrealistic expectations of their bosses. In the end, however, it was impossible to get evidence against the bosses, because they weren't the ones in the subway tunnels, actually falsifying the records.

This case, only briefly outlined here, demonstrated how unpredictable, complex, situational, and culturally based legal and bureaucratic decision-making could be. I felt

[2] https://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/subway-signal-equipment-maintenance-workers-charged-fixing-logbooks-entering-fake-inspection-data-article-1.1140909

that long-term participant observation in a prosecutor's office or another law-related bureaucracy could root out many of the complexities that go into the work, not as an exposé of corruption or a portrayal of bureaucratic violence, but as a realistic ethnographic depiction and analysis of what this kind of office life looked like.

Law appears to be results-oriented, but law is, in reality, a process (Moore 1994, Yngvesson 1976). When someone is officially charged with a felony, that final charge is all that the public tends to see. It is officially written down, inscribed in the record. But what kind of day-to-day social life led to those felony indictments? There was so much stuff that went on unofficially, informally – and even formally (meetings, police investigations) – that I was eager to investigate as an ethnographer. And having experienced the process of investigation and prosecution myself, I knew how much more of the law happened "in action" rather than "on the books" (Galanter 1981: 5).

Getting a green light to conduct participant observation in a prosecutor's office was looking unlikely, and so I brought my concerns and questions to the Public Administrator's Office. What did daily life look like there? What went into the decisions of the PA employees? The PA's work of estate administration was legal/bureaucratic work of a different kind – it took place in a much more intimate arena than the prosecutorial work I had once done. What really intrigued me at the time was how the work of estate administration brought together my interest in law and bureaucracy with classical anthropological and historical interest in the rituals surrounding death (e.g. Hertz 1960, Bloch and Parry 1982, Frazer 1903, Danforth 1982, Aries 1981, Geertz 1957). The idea of bringing together a somewhat unusual topic for anthropological ethnography – the bureaucracy – with a very classic topic – death rites – seemed new and

exciting. My interest in the daily life of prosecutors and bureaucrats had been an interest in a kind of intimacy between coworkers and even sometimes between paralegal and target (Pinedo-Padoch 2016). But I felt that working in this new field site, the PA's office, might put the strange relationship between bureaucracy and intimacy into even sharper relief. In a twist on literature describing traditional funerary rituals, my project would explore the process of laying to rest (a *legal* process) when it is coordinated and primarily handled by state actors. It would thus bring the anthropology of death into a legal/bureaucratic context.

When I started my research at the PA's office that first summer, I occupied a complex position. I was a researcher, but I was also there to work. This two-sided role was a challenge of workplace ethnography. But it was even more complicated because Bill had been my boss until only a few years earlier. Upon starting fieldwork, I felt that old employee's obligation to please him. At times, I felt that I had returned to my pre-graduate school life. However, I had no set schedule and could come into the office when I wanted. I was also unpaid. There were other unpaid interns at the PA's office that summer, too. These interns were Master's students in Public Administration at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who were pursuing employment in a PA-related field. Though they were unpaid like me, their future careers depended, in part, on how they performed as interns that summer. My role had different, but related, stakes. If I wanted to continue my research at the PA's office, I also had to perform well as an intern. But proving myself to Bill was not hard; we had already worked together for years, and he knew what I was capable of. The trickier part was building relationships with the other PA employees.

It became increasingly clear that aligning myself only with Bill would deprive me of the opportunity to develop relationships with everyone else in the office. So, while I did some work specifically for Bill that summer, I also offered my help to others. Pablo, one of the office's two head investigators, was eager to share his stories with me. I asked him whether I could accompany him to the field on his investigations. He told me I could tag along anytime.

I started going out on investigations to decedents' homes. In the field, I learned how investigations worked: what to search for, how long it took, and what kinds of people we might encounter. I saw all sorts of rooms, apartments, and houses, and the incredible variety of objects that filled the homes of New Yorkers. I began, also, to help out with other projects in the office, like organizing the vault and the case files. What started that summer only as a review of an audit for Bill expanded over time to work of all kinds.

During the following summer and the subsequent two years of fieldwork, I continued to navigate the pathway between researcher and employee. In my fieldnotes, I naturally began to portray myself as an employee, and my interlocutors as colleagues and coworkers. They were not *only* coworkers, but I always considered them more coworkers than anything else. Part of this was due to the fact that I had worked for city agencies in the past. When I write about people like Pablo, or Mohammed, an assistant investigator, or Maria, a case manager – all of whom played important roles in my fieldwork – I will continue to refer to them as colleagues and coworkers. But that is not all they were.

At the end of my first summer, I returned to Princeton feeling that my research at the PA's office had been fascinating but difficult to endure. I was worried that splitting

my time between the dull basement office and the stuffy, smelly apartments of the deceased – particularly bad in the New York summer heat – would prove too mentally and emotionally taxing for my long-term research. I met with my advisor and shared my worries. I began to consider other fieldwork options. Once classes started that year, I, however, quickly forgot these concerns. At the end of the academic year, the prospect of returning to the PA's office no longer felt daunting, perhaps because my experiences there had time to sink in and feel more manageable. I decided to return to the PA's office for a second summer and see whether long-term research really was possible.

When I came back that second summer, two employees had retired and the office felt different. The new people Bill hired during the year I was gone were closer to my age and easier for me to talk to. I felt more comfortable in the office; it even started to feel a little fun. I was doing less in-office work and frequently going to the field. The office's practices were beginning to feel like second nature. Because there were so many different kinds of decedent cases – each one had its own unique challenges – and so many contingent aspects of the PA's work, it took a long time to understand the office's written and unwritten procedures. My acquisition of the office's *habitus*, that is, its implicit systems of practice, made research more productive and more enjoyable. Bourdieu writes:

The habitus is the source of these series of moves which are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention—which would presuppose at least that they are perceived as one strategy among other possible strategies. (Bourdieu 1977: 73)

The PA's complex practices, which took a long time to both understand and adopt, are structured in such a way that is "regular," but is not consciously "the product of obedience to rules." That is, the PA's systems of practices are "collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor" (Bourdieu 1977: 72). As is made evident in appendix to this dissertion, the PA's office is a place with explicit rules, with official guidelines set out in New York State Law. In the actual daily work, however, these rules are neither acknowledged nor consciously followed. What emerges in daily work are practices based on knowledge developed over time, performed without conscious knowledge of their performance.

During my first summer at the PA's office, I had fears about conducting research in a bureaucratic fieldsite, concerns that were unrelated to the PA's work in particular. I was worried about approaching bureaucratic work through a normative lens, and that this would make anthropological analysis – through the deployment of thick description and social theory – near impossible. "Bureaucratic fieldsites make non-normative approaches exceedingly difficult;" Hoag writes, "the analyst can hardly fail to index discourses and behaviors against a set of (written) laws and regulations" (Hoag 2008, 83). Coming professionally from an audit background – before graduate school I worked as a government auditor – my desire to "index" what I observed against what was "written" was initially very strong. Because of my professional background, the very first work Bill asked me to do was review and respond to audit reports, which required me to use my techniques of normative thinking. But this kind of analysis was a behavioral corrective, not an anthropological approach.

Still, a normative approach characterized my early writing. The PA's office was recovering from a major scandal that first summer, and the office was disorganized. Under the former Public Administrator, a bookkeeper had stolen millions of dollars from decedents' bank accounts. Bill, a former prosecutor specializing in anti-corruption cases, had been hired to clean things up and put accountability and anti-fraud measures in place. Much of my time in the field that first summer, when I was not responding to audits, was spent organizing the office's vault and sorting through the papers that the former Public Administrator, apparently a "pack rat," had left in huge stacks in his office. It was difficult for me to reconcile the messiness of the office (which had shocked me) with the real interest I had in the investigative work that I shadowed some of the time. I frequently used words like "sloppy" to describe the office to others, and I found its lack of organization personally frustrating. When I came back from fieldwork that summer, I told people about both sides of the work: the investigations *and* how poorly the office adhered to bureaucratic standards of organization. I could see my Princeton colleagues bristle when I said "sloppy" and "disorganized" – but I could not stop myself from repeating those words.

Now, looking back, my struggle with normative thinking seems altogether foreign. After that first summer, I stopped trying to fix things. There were fewer things to fix: the previous PA's papers had all been organized. I was no longer responding to an audit that had accused the office of incompetency, without knowing that certain "bad practices" identified by auditors were actually consequences of a long and complicated estate administration process that was frequently out of the PA's control. The more time I spent in the office, the less I felt that I "knew better," and the less I tried to hold the office

to certain standards. This change in my thinking happened gradually, without my even being aware of the shift.

I no longer thought about how far my colleagues and I had strayed from the written rules. We never looked at the written rules anyway – although that did not mean we did not follow them. It just meant that a version of these guidelines was enacted in practice, on a near daily basis. My colleagues had internalized these procedures, and all the extra complications and variations that went along with them. I had internalized them, too.

Unfamiliarity breeds normative thinking. The more immersed I became as an ethnographer, the more I took the office's practices as a given, and the more I understood many of them as necessary. The problem I had once found so compelling – "bureaucratic fieldsites make non-normative approaches exceedingly difficult" – now strikes me as something that is apt to bother an ethnographer of bureaucracy only at the very beginning of their fieldwork. Once immersed in the office's community, normative thinking naturally disappeared. It was both through adopting the office's *habitus,* as well as better understanding its practices – which are connected – that I abandoned my earlier thinking. No wonder external auditors are brought in to do the task of comparing actual behavior to the written standards. These outsiders are still able to think that they "know better." Sometimes, from the inside, it really is hard to see what has gone wrong, and it takes an outsider to figure it out. But often, from the outside, it is near impossible to understand what is really going on.

Even after years in the field, however, I still struggled to come to terms with some of the PA's work. Why did my discomfort refuse to go away? And why did it intensify

once I finished up my main stretch of fieldwork? This dissertation is, in large part, guided by these feelings of discomfort. I use my own feelings of discomfort as a signal, a barometer to measure what we were doing. Even the fieldnotes that begin the following introduction demonstrate my feelings of discomfort, which manifest physically in nausea and my need for a "cold Coke."

Introduction

Fieldnotes

July 7th, 2015

This morning, Paul, Lisa, and I went to a decedent's apartment. Funny how that word, decedent, used to sound so strange and now it's so normal.

We drove the long way to East New York. Yolanda had died in her apartment and the super found her a few days later. By then her body had started decomposing – "decomp" is what Paul called it. When he said "decomp," it kind of took the sting out of the word.

Her neighborhood was pleasant, there were lots of single-family homes, brick homes with white railings and small gardens in the front.

The super of the building was a Caribbean guy. He told me he would check on Yolanda from time to time, because she lived alone, she did everything by herself. The last time he saw her alive, she gave him her rent check. He said she was very soft spoken. We asked him to come into the apartment with us but he said he didn't want to go inside again because he had found her there, and it had been awful.

Lisa peeled off the green police department sticker on Yolanda's door. The three of us put on our masks and blue gloves. I was worried the apartment would smell awful, but it wasn't terrible – at first. The kitchen was on the left as you walked in, then a big living room, then a closet and a bathroom on the left and a bedroom on the right. Paul found the mailbox key and looked through Yolanda's mail. Lisa searched the bedroom.

Part of the bedroom floor was covered with blankets. I pushed the blankets aside to get around them. Lisa saw me and said that I stepped right onto a blood stain, which I hadn't even noticed. This is where Yolanda had died.

I went into the bathroom. It could have been worse in there I guess. I looked through the medicine cabinet, found a prescription bottle and saved it. Paul told us to look for prescription bottles and medical records so that she could be officially biologically "identified." I kicked open the top of the trash and found a bunch of old mail. I pulled out a few old cable bills and a letter from AARP and gave these to Paul along with the prescription bottle.

There was a plaque in the living room from the City honoring Yolanda for twenty years of service to the Sanitation Department. She had been a secretary there.

Lisa found out that Yolanda was born in Alabama and might still have a brother. We are going to look for him. Other than that, no evidence of relatives. There was a bunch of

costume jewelry in the bedroom. There were some coins and about 11 dollars in cash. There was a Bible propped up on a shelf in the living room.

When I was going through the bedroom closet, which was close to the spot where she died, I mean one step away from it, I got overwhelmed by the heat and the smell. I felt bad. When we were done, we took off our masks, gloves, washed our hands. We put the bags of jewelry, coins, and cash in the trunk and got back in the car. Then I had to stop at a deli to get a cold Coke. I was still feeling queasy. Lisa and Paul seemed okay, though.

Even though every investigation was different, Yolanda's was quite typical. This abbreviated account of my visit to an elderly African American decedent's home has many of the features of a standard investigation. Many of my days at the PA's office, over the two summers and two full years that I spent there, looked like this. We would meet in the morning. Drop off our stuff in the office. Check in with our coworkers. And then we would head out to some neighborhood in Brooklyn.

The neighborhood, whether or not we talked about it, played an important part in the investigatory experience. I remember the neighborhoods, what they looked like, how they felt, what kinds of people and how many people were walking around, in the morning or early afternoon on a weekday. For example, I associate Ivan, a Russian-Jewish decedent, with a housing development in Coney Island. His development was owned by the Trump family. It was crumbling. I associate Libor, a Slovenian man, with an Orthodox Jewish enclave in East Williamsburg. There were more than thirty strollers

in the lobby of his building. These kinds of memories of places and people continued on, and reflected how huge and diverse the borough was, in terms of ethnicity, race, income, architecture, and so on.

I usually sat in the back of the car and looked through the manila envelope labeled with the decedent's name, case number, date of death, and address. Paul or Pablo would drive. They knew a little bit about the decedent from the case referral information, and from one or two phone conversations with the super or landlord, or maybe a friend.

Building supers featured prominently in our visits. They had access to the apartments, they were often the ones who found the decedent, if they had passed in their home.

These investigations were routine, but so intimate. In Yolanda's investigation, there was blood on the ground where the decedent had expired, but this was not really a big deal. It happened often enough. It was so routine and yet horrifying, often nauseating. Words like "decedent" and "decomp" were used – to take the sting out, to guarantee that this work remained a job, to distance PA workers from the disturbing things they frequently saw.

There was always the walk through of the apartment or house. I mapped out the home in my head, and so even that night, I could imagine what the home looked like, and even now, years later, I can read these fieldnotes about Yolanda and reimagine the apartment. Each person – Paul, Lisa, and I – searched a room. I remember the things that we took back to the office, but I also remember a lot of the other decorations in the apartment – like Yolanda's Bible, her plaque from the Department of Sanitation. In

another version of the above notes, I describe the dolls that Yolanda had positioned all around her bedroom. These were the kinds of things that stuck with me.

This dissertation focuses primarily on this category of experience: the field investigation. I also spent time in the office, but, for the most part, the investigations were what I was drawn to over and over, experientially and analytically. Our experiences over a large number and huge variety of investigations, all conducted using somewhat standard structure and procedures, revealed many different aspects and challenges of the PA's work. Most of all, they revealed how important the building of narrative was to the work of the Public Administrator, and how very *material* those narratives were. Between our sometimes wrenchingly intimate work – the blood stain left by Yolanda's decomposing body – and the bureaucratic/legal requirements of estate administration, sat these narratives. The journey from opening a decedent's case through its "Final Accounting" centered around the construction of formal narratives – written narratives required by the formal estate administration process – and informal narratives – the PA workers' unwritten stories about decedent cases, verbally exchanged, analyzed, and imagined throughout the administration process. These narratives were shaped by a legal/bureaucratic structure *and* were extremely intimate. As such, they served as a bridge between bureaucracy and intimacy in the work of the Public Administrator.

Narrative, bureaucracy, and intimacy

The dissertation is structured around my own narrative as a fieldworker. In the Preface I introduced the theme of bureaucracy and intimacy through the story of my introduction to the Public Administrator's Office. I described my own struggle at the

beginning with normative thinking – the impulse to "fix" everything according to a normative standard. I begin Chapter 1 somewhere in the middle of my fieldwork and then wander back and forth chronologically through the course of several subsequent chapters. I conclude the dissertation as I return to the field for one final case. The exact chronology of Chapters 1 through 4, however, is not important. What is important is that the Preface starts at the chronological beginning and Chapter 5 concludes at the chronological end. By the Chapter 5, my final chapter, having wrapped up my main stretch of fieldwork, I discover, upon returning, that I no longer feel accustomed to the PA's way of work. My discomfort with and dislocation from the PA – which peeked through in different ways throughout my fieldwork – returns in earnest again. I once again want to fix everything. But this discomfort takes a distinctly different form than my doubts and distress at the beginning, because by this point, I know the office's practices well, I am no longer the outsider I was at the beginning, I know what goes into the work.

The narrative that accompanies my development as a fieldworker does not move in a single arc. Moments of doubt, moments of discomfort, moments of feeling *outside* followed me throughout my fieldwork – they never fully disappeared. I try to make evident as the dissertation progresses that being an ethnographer in the field is accompanied by many moments of spiraling back, of meandering (Alison 2019).

This dissertation is a narrative about narratives. The primary category of experience in this dissertation is the field investigation; the narratives written, told, and imagined about these field investigations are the dissertation's (and the PA's) primary form of knowledge production. My PA colleagues and I understood our work through the construction of informal narratives, *and* our work had legal power through the

construction of formal narratives. That is, narratives were both a way of understanding things for ourselves, and a way of instantiating the law. Each kind of narrative production influenced the other: the informal influenced the formal, and the formal influenced the informal.

What is narrative, and how do we use it in our daily lives? In this dissertation I define narrative as a story; this definition is intentionally broad. Furthermore, narrative is essential to our own constructions of reality. Literary critic Peter Brooks writes:

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed. (Brooks 1984: 3)

In general, then, narrative is everywhere, in the stories "that we tell or hear told." Narrative is a way of processing and understanding experience. But before this definition of narrative gets so broad it becomes meaningless, I want to stop and think about the differences between *kinds* of narratives. How are different kinds of narratives constructed? What do they consist of? Are they written, spoken, or imagined? *Who* are they constructed by? And, most importantly, *what purposes do they serve* – that is, *what are their stakes*?

The purpose, or stakes, of narrative, are important to the PA's work because narrative is how the PA instantiates the law. More specifically, estate administration, that is, the process of laying a decedent to rest – after death, taking account of an individual's legacy before the law and "administering" it – is accomplished through the presentation of certain kinds of narratives.

A straightforward way of demonstrating this is to describe a legal document called the Final Accounting (a standard example of a Final Accounting with Decree, redacted to protect personal information, can be found in Figure 1).[6] When filed with the Court, this legal document officially "closes" the decedent's estate. Therefore, the Final Accounting is the final declaration of the decedent's legacy and how it will be distributed. The Final Accounting focuses on two aspects of the decedent's legacy: their distributees (family members), if any, and their assets. The Final Accounting, however, does not just list the total financial value of decedent's assets; while the Final Accounting decree lists the total sums of the decedent's assets and the amounts of the distributions, the Final Accounting's required appendices must include an accounting of every financial action taken during the process of estate administration, including the sale of decedent's material property (objects of market value), the sale of any real property (the decedent's apartment or house, and any other real estate), and the sale of any investments. The Final Accounting has the ultimate say on the decedent's legacy by presenting a narrative with certain structures and attributes. This final legal narrative is primarily focused on one thing: the accounting of the decedent's valuable possessions, real estate, and other

[6] A Final Accounting with Decree must be prepared for any estate worth upwards of $35,000. A similar but shorter document called an Informal Accounting must be prepared for any estate worth under $35,000. Here, I use Final Accounting to refer to both kinds of Accountings.

financial assets. The more of these possessions and other assets there are, the longer the Final Accounting will be, and the more substantial the decedent's legacy is before the law. The law is instantiated, therefore, through a narrative that is both distinctly material and directly connects the size of a life to its financial value; that is, the more stuff the decedent had in life, the more significant their legacy, the more of a life they lived.

Peter Brooks' work on narrative in law helps to explain how narrative gives the law its power. Brooks argues that the "purpose of putting [the facts] into narrative form" in criminal cases " is not simply to say what happened but to decide what to do about what happened: whether and how to assign blame, how to arrive at conviction" (Brooks 2022: 166). In other words, the law uses narrative strategically to assert its power to legally assign blame. In the Public Adminstrator's work, narrative is used to determine a decedent's legacy. The PA's formal narratives are not as *strategic* as Brooks' criminal case narratives. That is, they are not crafted individually in order to achieve a particular result. However, the PA's formal narratives conform to a particular structure designed for a particular result.

In the PA's work, therefore, like in Brooks' criminal cases, the law officially instantiates itself through its formal narratives. The PA's narratives, however, differ from Brooks' legal narratives in several ways: one, the PA's cases are not criminal; two, the PA's formal narratives are strategic in their *structure,* not in their individual design; three, the PA's work is characterized by both formal, written narratives and *informal, unwritten narratives*; and four, the PA's narratives are *distinctly material,* that is, they have a topography constituted by the decedent's material possessions of market value.

In this dissertation, I argue that there are two kinds of narratives being used in the work of the PA: the formal, written one like the Final Accounting, and the informal, unwritten one, which are the stories exchanged between and imagined by PA workers. My argument that the work is done through construction two kinds of narratives that influence each other builds on Cheryl Mattingly's work with occupational therapists (Mattingly 1998a, Mattingly 1998b). Like PA workers, Mattingly's occupational therapists operate in a world of bureaucratized data – the hospital ward – while doing the intimate work of caring for patients. That is, these occupational therapists do their intimate work in a setting that relies on "clinical rationality." PA workers do the intimate work of estate administration in a setting that relies on bureaucratic/legal rationality (Weber 1954). Mattingly argues that, in the course of their daily work, these occupational therapists engage in two kinds of "clinical talk": "*chart talk*," which conforms to the logic of "clinical rationality," and "*storytelling*," which are patient stories that "permeate clinical discussions" but have "no formal status as a vehicle for critical reasoning" (Mattingly 1998: 273b). My argument is similar but different from Mattingly's. Mattingly claims that "storytelling" is a "narrative" but that "clinical talk," which materializes in documents like patient charts, is "anti-narrative." Though others have discussed "biomedical accounts" like "chart talk" as narratives (e.g. Frankenberg 1986, Good 1994, Hunt 1994, Hunter 1991), Mattingly argues that "chart talk" is antinarrative because "it portrays the complex experiences of suffering and healing in oddly agent-free language (Mattingly 1998b: 275)." In contrast to Mattingly, I argue that written legal

documents like investigation reports[7] and Final Accountings[8] – which roughly correspond to "chart talk" – *are* narratives, and that they both influence and are influenced by informal narratives – which roughly correspond to Mattingly's "storytelling."

Mattingly's argument that storytelling is narrative and chart talk is antinarrative belongs to the more general argument that formal, official structures of knowledge production, like "chart talk," are immoral – that they are based on and promote attitudes of indifference to ethical human concerns. Mattingly writes that "biomedicine…offers a language, a mode of perception, and an organization of practice that denies its moral status" and that "medicalized treatment" negates the moral response that suffering calls for (Mattingly 1998b: 276). Similarly, in her work in the Canadian Arctic, Lisa Stevenson argues that the anonymous bureaucratic care provided to the Inuit is not only immoral, it is "murderous" (Stevenson 2012). Although she does not focus on narrative, Stevenson argues similarly to Mattingly that state care, in the anonymity of its methods – or, in Mattingly's words, in its "oddly agent-free language" – is cruel, ironic, and inhuman (Mattingly 1998b: 275). I bring in Stevenson because the state care that she examines in her ethnography has similarities with the type of state care – bureaucratic yet intertwined with the personal, and focused on death – that I examine. In contrast to the Alaskan government, what if, through its informal and formal narratives, the Public Administrator provided a kind of state care that was personal – that, despite its limitations, could lay a decedent to rest in a way that was not cruel and murderous?

[7] An example of an investigation report can be found in Figure 1.
[8] The Judicial Settlement Proceeding Checklist, a checklist listing all the required components of a Final Accounting and its ancillary documents, can be found in Figure 2.

Closely connected to the above argument is the idea of bureaucratic indifference. If the work of bureaucracy is, as Weber describes, a matter of professional execution "without regard to person in accordance to calculable rules" (Weber 1954: 350), then Mattingly's description of the "strangely agent-free" language in "chart talk," and its disregard for real human suffering, would be directly mirrored in the work of the Public Administrator. That is, if Public Administrator employees conformed to Weber's description of bureaucratic rationality – as cogs in a wheel, devoid of emotion, and working according to a total system of calculable rules – then they would indeed be indifferent bureaucrats. But Weber would be wrong about the Public Administrator. My PA colleagues are not devoid of emotion; their hearts bleed. And the office's rules and regulations, far from being totally caluculable, are often unwritten, rarely explicitly referred to, and frequently adapt based on the decedent. Of course, ultimately the Public Administrator does produce a standardized written narrative, the Final Accounting, which, seen by an outsider might look like an "antinarrative." But I argue that, since estate administration is a process, the Final Accounting, which legally settles the legacy of a decedent, is completely tied up with the more informal kinds of storytelling that happen throughout a decedent's case, and thus are imbued with both emotion and individuality.

Informal versus formal narratives

Informal narratives take a distinctly different shape from formal narratives. To understand the shape of informal narratives, it is useful to "think not of a story always following an arc, but of a reader's experience absorbing the story as doing so" (Alison

2019: 19). To imagine what this narrative shape might look like, let us imagine, then, that PA employees are readers. The informal narratives that PA employees construct are an account of their "reading" the field, of their "reading" a decedent's case over time. Here is another way to put it: replace the word "reader" in Alison's statement with the word "investigator," and the word "story" with "decedent's story." This would read: "think not of a story always following an arc, but of an investigator's experience absorbing the decedent's story as doing so." The meandering informal narrative follows PA employees' experiences as they investigate.

The PA's written formal narratives, however, follow more closely a given structure. The structure of formal narratives varies depending on the particular legal/bureaucratic document. In general, however, single formal narratives put "facts" together "into a meaningful sequence" (Brooks 2017: 3). These facts are put in a particular sequence in order to achieve a desired effect. The series of formal narratives that punctuate the process of estate administration is oriented toward the ultimate goal of closing a case, of laying the decedent's legacy to rest. Formal narratives, then, are not only formally structured discrete narratives necessary to the process of estate administration. These discrete narratives also constitute an *overarching narrative* of the decedent's esate administration process as an *entire sequence*. The whole sequence is also structured, and, most importantly, oriented toward a final resolution, which is the Final Accounting. The sequence of discrete formal narratives is oriented toward ultimately writing a satisfying "end to an unfinished narrative" (Brooks 2017: 3)

The relationship between the PA's informal and formal narratives is paralleled by the relationship between oral and written narratives described by literary theorist Walter

Ong. Ong writes that, in written narrative, "the writer can subject the unconscious inspiration to far greater conscious control than the oral narrator. The writer finds his written words accessible for reconsideration, revision, and other manipulation until they are finally released to do their work. Under the author's eyes the text lays out the beginning, the middle and the end, so that the writer is encouraged to think of his work as a self-contained, discrete unit, defined by closure" (Ong 1986: 145). The written word allows the narrator to create a narrative with a tighter, sequential form, that is a "discrete unit." The written narrative is, by nature, then, much tighter in structure than the informal narrative.

Material narratives, death, and time

The PA's formal and informal narratives are distinctly material; their substance and structures rely on material objects. My discussion of the materiality of legal narrative is a new contribution to the existing literature on law and narrative, whose use of materiality has, like other work on materiality and bureaucracy, focused on documents and other "graphic artifacts" (e.g. Suresh 2018, Hull, 2012a; Hull, 2012b; Riles, 2000; Gupta, 2012). The material objects that constitute the PA's narratives are not only documents or "graphic artifacts," but, more importantly, the personal material objects and homes – the material afterlives – of decedents.

The centrality of material afterlives to the work of estate administration is apparent in the opening fieldnotes. In Yolanda's house, we search for stuff: a letter from the AARP, a prescription bottle, some cable bills, 11 dollars in cash. We notice stuff: costume jewelry, a Bible, a plaque, the blankets and the bloodstains. All this stuff made it

into my fieldnotes; some of this stuff made it into the investigation report. The centrality of material afterlives to constructing narratives is paralled in the work of archeologists. Archeologist Michael Pluciennik writes that the "events or processes" described by archeological narratives, such "as the origins of agriculture or the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition, are always constructed from elements or occurrences in the past or the present; those elements may be the presence (or absence) of a single potsherd, domesticated bone, or cereal grain at a particular site…the appearance of particular material cultures or practices settlement patterns, or contemporary gene frequency distributions, for example" (Pluciennik 1999: 656). Archeologists write historical narratives that are constructed from less robust collections of material objects and other types of material data, even from the "absence" of a single potsherd. In this way, the subject of archeological narratives is far grander than the PA narrative, while at the same time based on smaller quantities and different categories of data that are material in some respect.

Material afterlives not only constitute informal and formal narratives, which conform to and are influenced by legal and bureaucratic structures, they are also central to the way time exists in the work of the Public Administrator. Specifically, it is the fact that these material objects are left after death that creates the strange temporal space of estate administration: its legal and extralegal temporalities, and its rhythms of urgency and dormancy. Though death may signify an end, it is in fact the beginning of a different kind of time that is orchestrated in stops and starts by the work of the material objects, people, and the law.

My discussion of material afterlives in this dissertation stretches well beyond previous ethnographic portrayals of bureaucratic objects, recalling anthropological work

on the temporal complexity and possibilities of ruins. The material afterlives of decedents are modern ruins with "stories to tell" (Dawdy, 2010: 777). The objects that Public Administrator employees uncover, muse over, investigate, get appraised, and sell off, are often appraised and sold and handed off *again and again*, "reveal[ing] time's twists" (Dawdy, 2010: 761). I heed Dawdy's call to treat afterlives "not as interludes but as the main act" (Dawdy, 2010: 773). Dawdy, Benjamin, Munn, Stoler, and others richly explore how material afterlives reveal something about urban and imperial histories. I, in contrast, examine what these afterlives reveal about how death, the law, and bureaucracy make time strange (Dawdy, 2010; Benjamin, 1999; Munn, 2013; Stoler, 2013; Gordillo, 2014).

Timeline and Methods

I began my fieldwork at the PA's office in the summer of 2015, returned in the summer of 2016, and stayed until the summer of 2018. Even after my main stretch of fieldwork ended, I continued to visit friends at the office and to follow a single remaining case, which I discuss in Chapter Five. When the COVID pandemic hit in the winter of 2020, I stopped my occasional visits. I continued to text with Bill throughout the pandemic, a difficult time for the PA's office, which had to significantly scale back its investigative practices as New York City was experiencing some of the highest death rates in the country. Bill is now retired from the office.

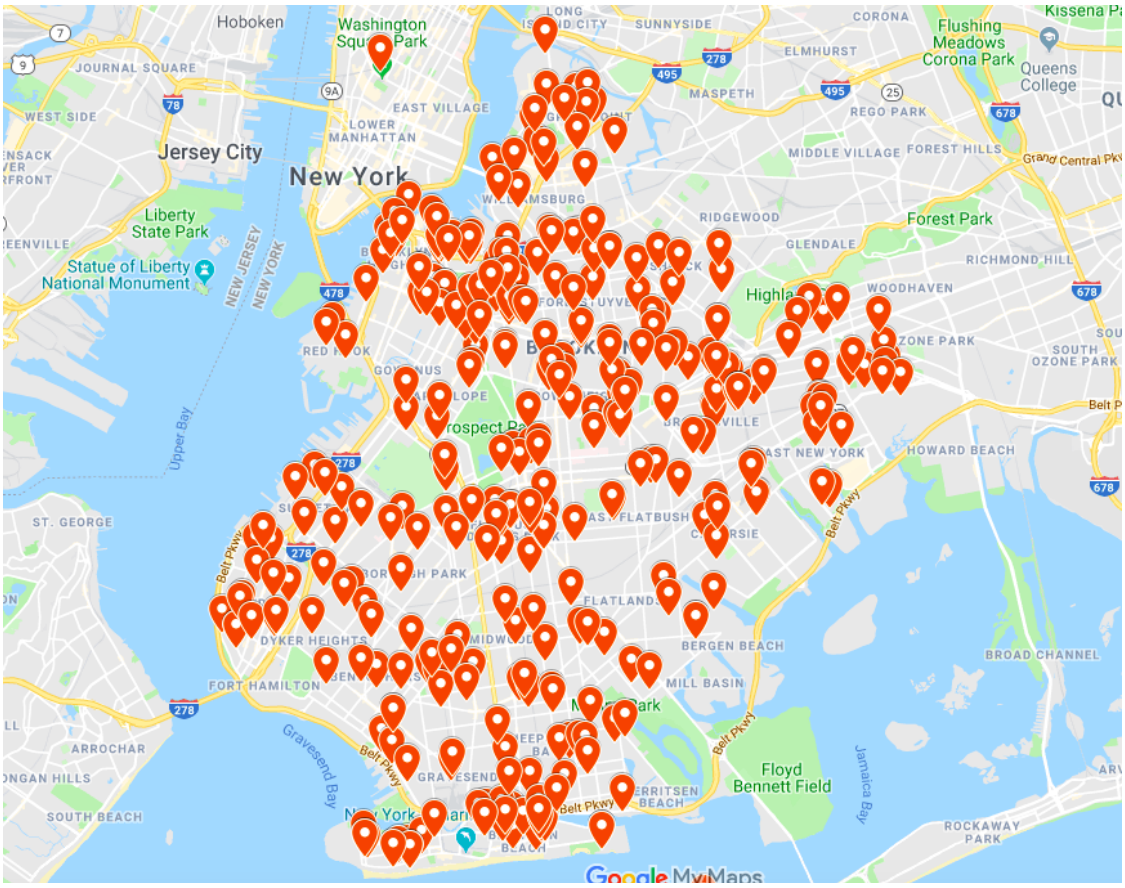
The work that I did for the PA comprised the majority of my research. The world that I was researching emerged from the office's mandate, and thus it determined the scope of my project. I also spent time outside of the office conducting interviews and

participant observation with associated people and organizations. And I socialized with colleagues over lunch and after work. These were opportunities to gossip, relax, discuss cases, and get to know each other.

I conducted extended interviews with friends and family of several decedents, outside of investigations. I approached these people specifically as an anthropologist doing research, not as a representative of the PA's office.

I was also interested in following the journey of decedents' possessions and conducted interviews and participant observation with several of the junk luggers/antiques dealers that bid on decedents' property. One of them allowed me to shadow him while he cleaned out a decedent's house. This gave me a new perspective on the work of estate administration. I found that the antiques dealers/junk luggers were extraordinarily happy about their work, much more so than were my PA colleagues. They had a real passion for old stuff; they did their work because they liked it. I also observed several appraisals of decedents' property, and I attended one personal property auction.

After so much driving around Brooklyn between investigations, I wanted to better visualize where, exactly, we were going every day. I was curious, also, if my sense that the PA's cases were spread out all over the borough was actually correct. Thus I compiled six months' worth of PA cases from January through June 2017, organized the cases by residence, and mapped them. Then I spent a month trying to walk through as much of the map as possible. I started with the northernmost neighborhood of Brooklyn – Greenpoint.



My walking tour of the borough made it as far south as East New York and ended when I made it back West through Crown Heights. There were too many homes to complete the tour. But I did get a sense of how frequently cases came into the office and how close the decedents had lived to each other – and this was working with only six months of data.

Dissertation Structure

The first chapter, "Time After Death," focuses on time in the work of the Public Administrator. I discuss, in two parts, how the PA's organizational and legal procedures structure the flow of time and affect the knowledge-making practices of the PA. In the first part, I demonstrate how two temporal categories—the legal and extralegal—come up

against each other in tense and uncanny ways, and how this convergence of legal and extralegal temporalities produces the distinctive material afterlives of the dead. In the second part, I describe how urgency and dormancy, two temporal rhythms, characterize the work of the Public Administrator.

In the second chapter, "Narrative as Ethnography," I show that the Public Administrator's work is a kind of storytelling shaped by formal and informal narratives that circulate among coworkers and their publics. I introduce the use of formal and informal narratives in the Public Administrator's work. Although formal narratives in the shape of official reports and court documents are, to an outsider, the only "visible" evidence of narrative-making, this evidence is constantly shaped by the rich informal narratives constructed by coworkers. I argue that these informal narratives consist of both language and material objects, which play an essential role in establishing the decedent's legal persona. I examine the PA's narrative-making as a kind of "thin ethnography" (Jackson Jr. 2013) that reveals the realities and intricacies of certain social phenomena – in this case, how people die alone and what kinds of care or neglect they receive in their final days.

If a decedent's narrative is constructed from their material property, then what happens when this material property is destroyed? In my third chapter, "Destruction and Hoarding," I explore this question by looking at two seemingly different, but in reality similar, cases. The first case concerns the estate of a woman whose valuable home and possessions were destroyed by squatters. The second case is of a severe hoarder who had so many possessions – packed so closely together – that they no longer had value; the market value of his possessions was destroyed by his own act of overaccumulation. In

each case, the destruction of market value meant the destruction of their PA narrative. The more possessions of market value a decedent has, the more substantial their narrative will be, and vice versa. In other words, according to the PA and the probate court in general, the more valuable stuff you had, the more of a person you were. Market value is directly linked to the storied life. I then examine the consequences of this insight and argue that the PA's legal narratives are primarily *material* – and importantly so.

In the fourth chapter, "When Death Gets Personal," I explore moments of what I call breakage in the field. I recount several ethnographic stories about deaths that emotionally affected both me and my colleagues. The work of estate administration requires a certain level of emotional distance to be sustainable for its practitioners. This chapter addresses the place of care and distance in the work of the PA. I argue that PA employees practice a state of "limited caring" in relation to decedents. I position my argument against the cases made by anthropologists and other social scientists who have argued that bureaucracy is "stupid" and a kind of "violence" (Graeber 2016). To characterize PA workers as indifferent bureaucrats would be to completely mischaracterize their work. These kinds of misunderstandings are why it is important to also produce ethnographies in which the anthropologist is positioned inside with bureaucrats, rather than invariably outside with their clients (Hoag 2014).

In the fifth and final chapter, "Cecil," I examine the case of one decedent, Cecil Taylor, whose case turned all the assumptions of PA's work completely upside down. A well-known musician with a robust social life and a significant artistic legacy, Cecil was by no means an isolated or tragic figure, like my colleagues and I often assumed the PA's decedents to be. Nevertheless, because Cecil did not draft a will and had no close family,

his estate still ended up in the PA's office – the place of last resort. But would this situation have been upsetting to Cecil? That is, considering Cecil's unusual attitudes towards money and possessions, would it even have mattered to him what fate his money and possessions had? And if it did not matter to him, did this mean that the PA's assumption of the ethical import of protecting material possessions, and indeed its assumption that *identity was defined by material possessions*, was totally invalidated?

Finally, Cecil's case came at the very end of my fieldwork. The normative thinking that had plagued me at the beginning of my fieldwork, had gradually faded as my research continued. However, while researching Cecil's case, I found that the problem of normative thinking – that is, holding the PA's work up to a standard and wanting to "fix everything" – had returned, but in a different form.

Intestate Succession, Pace and Rhythm

In the United States, the transfer of property after death is organized around the deceased's freedom to dispose of property as they wish (Friedman 2009). This is referred to as "dead hand control." Americans can set unusual conditions that must be met in order to inherit. If someone dies intestate, however – having left no last testament specifying the disposition of their property – then what is to be done with everything that remains? If the deceased's freedom of disposition guides American succession, then how can the deceased's wishes be honored when they have not made them legally known?

In the great majority of cases when the deceased has not made their wishes legally known, the American legal system turns to family. Legal scholars Dukeminier and Sitkoff (2013) write that intestacy law favors certain family members over others, reflecting "empirical

studies…undertaken to determine popular preferences for intestate succession" (Dukeminier and Sitkoff, 2013: 65). The creators of these laws have made some effort to guess at the deceased's wishes, but these efforts limit themselves to family relationships. "Nevertheless," they write, "[a] plan that suits the majority is the most drafters of intestacy statutes can hope for" (Dukeminier and Sitkoff, 2013: 65).

Sometimes, however, an individual dies intestate *and* with no close family willing to administer their estate. When these cases occur, the Public Administrator steps in. Public Administrator cases challenge the American right of disposition radically: there is little to no family to inherit, and if there are close family members, they are unwilling or unable to get involved – except in small, informal ways. The work of the PA is, therefore, only minimally constrained by the dead's freedom of disposition. Instead, the PA deals directly in the things that are left behind and the agency's location at the outer edges of American inheritance laws affects the temporal trajectory of its actions.

Loved ones are supposed to go through the deceased's things, inherit family treasures, sell off other objects at estate sales, move into the deceased's home or sell it, and inherit the money. It is all supposed to be done at a certain pace and with attention paid to what the deceased would have wanted. Instead, when the PA takes over, all the stuff that is left after death becomes directly subject to a legal/bureaucratic process that is contingent on a variety of factors and moves at its own pace and to its own rhythms.

Chapter 1 | Time After Death[9]

This chapter employs two perspectives to understand the role of time in the work of the Public Administrator. In the course of its narrative-making, the PA performs different legal and bureaucratic temporalities.

The work of the PA moves according to certain legal temporalities – created through and marshaled by the law – while other extralegal temporalities continue their march irrespective of what the law and bureaucracy want.

In Part 1, I argue that the convergence of legal and extralegal temporalities produces the distinctive material afterlives of the dead. I focus on the convergence of legal and extralegal temporalities, and how this uncanny convergence is manifested in decedents' material afterlives. This section focuses on the stuff of the PA's work: in particular, the work of narrative-making as a material process, involving both the decedent's material possessions and the paperwork involved in administering their estate. This discussion is decedent-centric: how do these temporalities produce the material afterlives of particular decedents?

In Part 2, I argue that the PA's work alternates between two temporalities: urgency and dormancy. First, I explore the "feeling" of these two temporalities in various aspects of the PA's day-to-day work. Then, I argue that urgency and dormancy have ethical implications for the work of the PA. As an institution serving the public doing intimate and bureaucratic work, the PA has moral expectations put upon it. These moral expectations are tied up intimately with the pace of its work. Finally, I reflect on my experience with

[9] Parts of this chapter are based on Pinedo-Padoch 2022.

external auditors as a way of questioning how pace and ethics are intertwined in the PA's work.

The analysis in this chapter is based on an assumption that there is no basic, "natural," over-arching "container" of time (Grabham 2016; Greenhouse 1996). Rather, there are multiple, socially constructed, disaggregated "temporalities" that emerge out of assemblages of human and non-human actors (Serres and Latour, 1995).

Time, legal theorist Emily Grabham argues, "is material" and can be "conjured… through the things we use when we "do law" (Grabham, 2016: 14). Outside of Grabham's legal studies, some anthropological work on bureaucracy has similarly argued that bureaucratic time "takes shape through an assemblage of humans and non-humans, with specific spatial and material qualities" (Hoag 2014: 419). In his ethnography of South Africa's immigration bureaucracy, Hoag follows Matthew Hull "in thinking bureaucratic worlds through Latour's concept of "corporate bodies" or "object institutions" – networks of active humans and artifacts" (Latour 1999; Hull 2012a; Hoag 2014: 419). As bureaucratic worlds are constructed through associations of humans and non-humans, so bureaucratic time takes shape through these associations. This particular conception of bureaucratic time allows "the materiality and indeterminacy of" the Public Administrator's "lived bureaucratic [world] to shine through" detailed ethnographic stories (Hoag 2014: 419).

Both parts of this chapter focus on the way that time "is material" and can be "conjured…through the things we use when we "do law." But in Part 1 I focus heavily on how the *material afterlives of the dead* are produced through the convergence of legal and extralegal temporalities, while in Part 2 I focus on how urgency and dormancy take shape

through a *constellation of objects such as clothes, through the rhythm of bodies, through the looks of people, and the exchange of documents*. Part 2 is about *the dance of the PA's office*: what is its pace, and what does it look like.

Ethnographers have written about how bureaucracies control and capture time, using time as a political tool; these analyses include the work of Katherine Verdery on socialist Romania, and Javier Auyero on welfare in Argentina (Verdery, 1996; Auyero, 2012; Smart and Smart, 2008; Sellerberg, 2008). In my own research, however, I found that the bureaucratic shaping of time was neither necessarily strategic nor used as a political tool. It was haphazard, dependent on the situation; it was not purposely nefarious although it could be frustrating. And different bureaucracies, both private and public, frequently intersected with one another. Certain bureaucracies imposed their own temporalities on other bureaucracies, again, not to gain strategic advantage, but because of their inattention or ignorance. Hoag introduces the concept of "dereliction" to describe a circular temporal state that see-saws between policy and practice, between progression and delay, and back again (Hoag 2014). A similar kind of temporal rhythm – of urgency and dormancy – characterized the work of the Public Administrator.

Part 1: Material Afterlives

When I began fieldwork in the PA's office, what struck me immediately was how much time everything took. Some cases were referred to the PA soon after a decedent passed, especially if the body had not yet been buried. But many others were given to the PA months or even years afterward. Once a case was in the PA's hands, activity would speed up briefly and then drag again. For a case to be closed – all its assets liquidated and

distributed, and all the legal papers signed – it would often take years. Over and over again, I would see the work drag on, not because of any lack of care from PA employees, or because of their political agendas, but because of the complex and contingent nature of the work itself, of its procedures and practices. Meanwhile, the world around these estates seemed to move along at a regular pace.

Death forces those left behind to experience what lingers of a person: homes, objects, money, memories, biological remains. Death stops biographical time while interrupting and reorienting other modes of temporality. Legal and extralegal temporalities that orchestrate the use, nature, and movement of material afterlives often collide with each other, one advancing irrespective of the other.

Annette

Annette died three years ago, Pablo told me, but the Public Administrator had only just received her case. She had lived into her 80s, never had children, and was married, but her husband Maurice had predeceased her. We would probably not get into her house on our first investigation – no one had given us a set of keys. Pablo said that there was little information to go on and, since her estate was in limbo for three years, we might encounter uncooperative squatters on her property.

The morning of the investigation, I met Pablo in the office. We gathered our supplies – Annette's case file, rubber gloves, face masks, and an evidence bag – and drove to her house. I looked through the case file while Pablo drove. The file included a number of court documents, one or two office case reports, and a series of emails about Annette's case. I learned that Annette was born in Latvia and had emigrated to New York from Germany in the 1950s.

She was married to one man, briefly, in the early 1950s, divorced soon after, and then married Maurice, with whom she stayed until his death. She had only two living relatives, both elderly cousins in Germany. Over the three years since Annette died, her cousins had petitioned the Surrogate's Court to appoint a New York-based friend as her estate administrator. They did not visit the US after Annette's death and attempted their legal maneuvers from a distance. Their petition had ultimately failed. Though it was not explicitly written in State Surrogate's Court statutes, from my experience at the PA's office I knew that first cousins could not qualify as estate administrators, much less first cousins who were not Americans and lived overseas. Appointing a local proxy was, therefore, completely unrealistic. And yet three years had been lost, mostly to this attempt.

I wondered why Annette's cousins never knew about this unwritten but strict rule. Was it because of their geographical distance, or the language barrier? Even when Annette died, in 2014, it was easy to communicate between the United States and Germany. German was not a rare language, and many translators, perhaps not in the courthouse but certainly nearby, were available. If overseas communication *had* been easy, who would have told the cousins that their petition would fail? It would likely have been their lawyer. Perhaps their lawyer had little experience in this strange corner of estate law and, like many other attorneys, did not know the petition would fail. Or perhaps he had told them it would fail, and the cousins insisted on continuing anyway. To the Public Administrator, however, these details did not matter much. What mattered was that the PA had been appointed in the absence of any qualified estate administrator, and Annette's case, after being delayed for three years, now had to move urgently.

We arrived at Annette's house, a large Victorian with a wraparound porch on a quiet block in a residential neighborhood. Before getting out of the car, Pablo handed me letters to slip under the front and back doors, informing whoever lived there – if anyone – that the State was in control of the property.

The three-year delay created through slow, opaque legal practice between two women in Germany and a New York City courtroom had come to an end and now the estate was characterized by a new urgency. The long legal standstill and the new progression were present in our visit to Annette's house that day through the materials that remained in her home.

The law forces things to stand still. In death, the presumption is that the decedent's estate is preserved as it was upon their death. This is the only way that their legacy can be counted up accurately and then portioned out when distributions are made. Someone who has a will designates in advance what each distributee of their estate will receive. In intestate distribution, the decedent's estate consists of what they left upon on their death, and the intestate succession act designates who receives what percentage of the decedent's final distribution.

Standstill, a legal temporality, is characterized by a lack of change. In *standstill*, the law does not permit objects to move and assets can be neither collected nor distributed. Annette's estate was at a bureaucratic standstill because her case could not be legally resolved. It was at a financial standstill because her assets could not be distributed. And it was at a material standstill because Annette's belongings – the actual objects that she owned, and the home that she maintained in life – could not be moved, changed, appraised, or sold. The material afterlife of her estate was paralyzed.

Progression is a legal temporality oriented towards a future resolution. For Annette's case, a resolution meant the complete administration of her estate: its liquidation, the distribution of her assets, and its legal "closing." On a daily basis, *progression* meant that PA employees worked on discrete tasks in order to resolve her case, including appraisals of her home and personal property. Progression imbued the material objects inside Annette's home – and her home itself – with a sense of moving forward, towards financial and legal resolution.

In Annette's backyard, a cat ran past me as I slipped the PA's letters under the back door. I turned around and saw a young man. This, we learned, was Oleg. Oleg told us that he had been living in the house since before Annette's death. He met Annette after her husband passed, when he worked at the pharmacy around the corner. When Oleg told Annette that he was looking for a place to stay before his family joined him from Russia, she offered to rent him a room. Oleg lived there with her for years. Three years after Annette's death, Oleg was still living there, now with his cousin and elderly father.

Annette and her husband Maurice, a historian of early cinema, had primarily occupied the first floor and the basement. After Annette died, Oleg told us he kept these two floors locked, allowing only Annette's cat into the apartment — the same cat that had been following us outside. Annette's space was, according to Oleg, exactly as she had left it three years earlier. Her estate's legal standstill was reflected in the unchanging arrangement of her home. The home, and the objects inside, were frozen in mid-gesture: since no family or state authority had come by to assert their ownership, Annette's things were kept where they were. Only the legally designated authorities were allowed to move and distribute Annette's things after her death. We had finally arrived, but it had taken us three years to get there. The long legal standstill could literally be seen, manifested in the objects that surrounded us. At the same time, this

frozen temporality depended on objects being physically maintained in some way, protected from rot and disintegration. If these objects were not maintained as they were, then the law's need for a completely intact estate became a sort of fiction. But because of the power of extralegal entropic time, things inevitably fell apart, faded, rusted over, or decomposed.

Oleg let us in to the first-floor apartment so we could look at Annette's stuff and broadly survey its value. While Pablo and I walked through the spacious bedroom, kitchen, dining room, and parlor, we assessed the potential resale value of the objects. We also aesthetically appreciated the couple's idiosyncratic tastes. Pablo and I found the home interesting, personal, and charming – from the ceramic heads along the parlor window to the stickers and framed needlepoints on the kitchen walls. Our knowledge of Annette and Maurice came from looking at and being with these unusual items.

Each thing was a portal to a specific past that Pablo and I tried to construct. Constructing Annette's narrative through the objects in her home allowed the office to perform the legal task of administering her estate. If we learned more about Annette's past, perhaps we would know if she had written a will that was missing, if she had additional family, and what other assets she might have.

Over the next several visits, Pablo and I continued to search through the basement to uncover and construct a narrative of Annette's life with Maurice through the objects they chose and created. Much of the sprawling basement was filled with Maurice's things. Pablo and I discovered hundreds of old posters, LPs, movie reels, videocassettes, and movie stills from early comedies: two women dressed in drag, gesturing with big cigars; a Buster Keaton-like man eating sloppily while his angry wife hovers over him. One corner of the basement was filled with filing cabinets. The contents of these cabinets revealed that Annette had worked for

decades as an administrative assistant at a brokerage firm. Past the filing cabinets was the door to a small bathroom, where, above the toilet, we found a large painting of a single eye atop a pair of pink lips.



Though Oleg claimed, as the law required, that he had kept Annette's home frozen in time, the house had remained a living, breathing organism upon which its remaining residents depended. Its infrastructure was deteriorating. The kitchen looked as if it had been left untouched by Oleg and the other residents, but a pipe had burst through the ceiling in one corner, and that wall was stained. Water had leaked through the bathroom ceiling– the sink, the toilet, and the bathtub were all in disrepair.

It took us several visits over the next month to get through everything. It was getting cold: the boiler was broken and winter was starting. Bruce, Pablo's boss, insisted that we get the house ready for auction – which would be the office's biggest step yet towards liquidating Annette's assets. The house would likely sell at a lofty price, which would boost the reputation of the office, its supervising courts, and contracted attorneys. The PA's office recouped one percent of the closing value of an estate; the contracted attorneys received up to six percent, on a sliding scale; and the supervising courts enhanced their prestige when large estates were resolved expeditiously under their direction. So even though written laws and regulations governing the PA's office mandated a reasonable expeditiousness in its estate work, it was the complex of detailed practices and minor expectations surrounding the PA's office that made the need to progress especially urgent. As the day-to-day case workers, however, Pablo and I could only tolerate the cold inside Annette's house for a few hours at a time. Despite the legal need for *progression* and the feeling of *urgency*, these extralegal temporal factors – entropic time and seasonal change – undermined our ability to do our job and frustrated us on a daily basis.

Each time we visited the house, it became more apparent that it was falling into increasing disrepair and disorder. Though the house was beautiful— large rooms with their original moldings, an elegant spiral wooden staircase, a stained-glass skylight —nothing was working: not the stove, not the heat, and none of the toilets but one, which was three flights up. Entropy had taken over. Why, we asked ourselves, had Oleg allowed these problems to happen and neglected to fix them, particularly with his elderly father in the house?

Upon reflection, it became apparent that Annette's legal standstill had allowed Oleg to avoid eviction. Over the three years since Annette's death, Oleg himself had strategically frozen in place so that the City would not notice him. Building repairs, however desperately needed, might risk contact with the City, which could mean eviction since he had no legal right to be there. Oleg had employed standstill as a tactic to keep Annette's house in a legal blind spot. To continue living there, the house, a part of Annette's material afterlife, had to remain as invisible as possible, and it had therefore become victim to infrastructural deterioration.

That winter, Pablo and I went to the house with Amy, the PA's auctioneer, to get a sense of what in Annette's house had resale value. To prepare for the real estate auction, we first had to sell off the contents of the home. With Amy's help, Pablo and I progressed towards a resolution of Annette's estate in which the maximum profit – with maximum ease – was realized on her material assets.

The house was, Pablo and I thought, full of valuable things. Amy was less enthusiastic. She walked through the house slowly, picking up objects and looking them over. Some pieces of furniture, she said, could be sold for a few hundred dollars apiece, but we would have to hire movers to bring it all out to her auction house. Many of the things I personally loved — a mug designed like a fisherman's face with a fish-shaped handle, a gong mounted between two bull's

horns, intricate wall sconces that resembled bouquets of flowers, and the painting of the lips and eye — were, Amy acknowledged, worth a little bit because they were amusing, but had no resale value beyond that.



Ultimately, no items from inside the house were auctioned off. Instead, two of the PA's clean-out contractors purchased Annette's possessions in bulk and cleared everything out in advance of the real estate auction. Annette's things would be sold by these contractors in flea markets or small-time auctions. Then perhaps these items would be resold again, presented attractively in an antiques store for a higher price. Though the many objects in Annette and Maurice's house were acquired at different times and in different places over the couple's

decades together, each floor was cleared out in one or two days. The contractors finished quickly so they could move on to other jobs, and the house could be shown to potential buyers and auctioned off. The legal and financial needs of the PA's office and its contractors dictated the rapid temporality of progression, articulated through the movement of these objects. The couple's material afterlife, accumulated slowly through their lives together, then frozen still for years, had been distributed to others within a few days.

Annette: Paperwork as Material Afterlife

If the subject of the PA's work – the estate – consists of things, then what about the *form* of its work? In other words, how do time and material objects intertwine in estate administration as a document-focused legal-bureaucratic process? Grabham (2016) asks this question in her own research:

"How "material" is legal form? Positioning legal form as an object of inquiry challenges the prevailing tendency in social science research to view technicalities and documents as "mute evidence" or "non-reactive" (Prior 2008: 823). Instead, it is in the chosen or fabricated form of law – the particular discursive and material shape of the contract, for example, or the orientation and wording of the contractual terms – that we can discern much about legal rationalities, actions, effects, and relationships." (Grabham 2016: 45)

As with other legal and bureaucratic practices worldwide, documents – whether on paper or electronic – are the material objects through which the organizational practices and challenges of administration are mediated, processed and negotiated (Hull 2012b). The particular form and content of the documents dealt with by the PA – documents that are not necessarily produced by the office, but, rather, that the PA must complete in the course of its work administering an estate – affect the temporal trajectory of estate administration. Therefore, legal temporalities affect not only the things decedents leave behind, but also the bureaucratic and legal documents that dominate estate work. These documents, like decedents' homes and personal objects, are another part of their material afterlives.

Bureaucracies are famous for their lack of expediency or efficiency. The slowness of probate court is lampooned most famously in Dickens' *Bleak House*, in which the central probate case, Jarndyce and Jarndyce, drives its characters to ruin. Dickens writes:

> Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on. This scarecrow of a suit has, in the course of time, become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means… Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old people have died out of it… The little plaintiff or defendant, who was promised a new rocking-horse when Jarndyce and Jarndyce should be settled, has grown up, possessed himself of a real horse, and trotted away into the other world. (Dickens, 1977: 8)

Jarndyce and Jarndyce had no end; Annette's case did, but not for years. The same slow movement that plagues the parties to Jarndyce and Jarndyce sits like a "dense fog" (Dickens,

1977: 5) over the basement office of the Public Administrator. The official papers that pile up in Dickens' Court of Chancery also pile up at the PA's office. PA estates alternate between urgency and dormancy during the long process of document-based estate administration. But the Public Administrator's office is different in one respect: it is not a typical bureaucracy. The PA exists on the very margins of bureaucratic practice, and it partly due to this that even the urgent moments of estate administration can become slow and frustrating.

After Pablo and I completed our initial investigation into Annette's estate, we brought the information we collected back to the office. Maria, one of the PA's two case managers, took what we collected and proceeded with her side of the work. She would take stock of Annette's assets, organize them, and reach out to banks and debtors: the office work. Since I hoped to follow Annette's case from beginning to end, Maria asked me to compile a list of Annette's assets. Together, we began the process of cashing out Annette's bank accounts and investments. Over the next two years, we wended our way through mountains of paperwork and endured mounting impatience.

Cashing out investments required waiting and talking to people who gave conflicting instructions. If you followed one set of instructions, and someone with another set of instructions received your paperwork, then you might have to start the process all over again. In addition, the PA's office would have to prove its right to make investment sales or bank withdrawals on behalf of Annette's estate. Filling out the right paper in the right way, and sending it to the right person, ensured a proper authentication of the PA's identity and proved, on paper, its legal right to administer an estate. The focus on correct form and official authentication relied on the physical exchange of material documents. The exchange of

documents could not be virtual – both ordinary and investment banks required material proof of administrative authority.

The process of cashing out investments often changed, however, because no standard procedure was developed for public estate administrators. Many banks and investment firms already had standard forms and procedures for estate executors — people who were legally recognized as executors in a decedent's last testament — but not for public estate administrators. The idea that a state office and *not* an individual person handled a decedent's estate flummoxed many.

Many delays were related to this issue. It was not the overwhelming number of forms we had to fill out that constituted this delay –it was the fact that there was no single right form. When Maria and I called investment firms, particularly the larger ones, we were often asked for our individual social security numbers, because they categorized us as "executors." Our social security numbers had nothing to do with decedents' estates, but it was often difficult to communicate this to brokerage firms and banks that had their strict procedures.

In the exchange of administrative documents, there was always a tension between the progressive pace of administration procedure and the constant delays we endured. These delays, imposed on one bureaucracy (the PA) by another bureaucracy (investment banks) were not strategic, but rather resulted from a complex of issues: contingency, our own obscure status as an agency, and miscommunication.

Annette's house was eventually sold at auction. After the real estate deal closed, Maria and I continued to pick away at Annette's remaining investments. Her largest investment portfolio was the first to be sold off. It was exciting for us to receive and deposit the portfolio's proceeds, in the form of a physical check, which totaled over a million dollars.

At some point, I began wrapping up my fieldwork, and Maria was working intensely on her many other cases. Though Annette's home was sold, it would still take a long time for the estate to reach its "final accounting" stage, including long periods of dormancy. Like the generations born, grown, and passed away while Jarndyce and Jarndyce languished in the Court of Chancery (Dickens, 1977), so Annette's case dragged on while I completed my fieldwork, got engaged and married, and Maria became pregnant and gave birth to her first child. The march of extralegal generational time continued as Annette's case continued its stop and start movement, orchestrated by the law and bureaucracy, towards the finish line. It was this disorienting, often frustrating, disconnect between extralegal and legal temporalities that characterized our work, time and time again, at the PA's office.

Joyce and Nina: Material Afterlives and Atmosphere

Like Annette, both Joyce and Nina had died years before our first investigation. The two women were a mother and daughter who had lived together. Joyce, an older woman, predeceased her daughter by less than a year. She died of natural causes. Nina, who was in her 40s, died of a drug overdose in their home shortly after. As is the customary practice, police officers, assisted by the medical examiner, reported to the apartment after Nina passed to recover her body and rule out any suspicious causes of death. The medical examiner took Nina's body and the apartment was sealed: a big green sticker with the NYPD's insignia was pasted over the door jamb. No one entered the apartment for the next two years. Until we came.

Joyce and Nina's case demonstrates, in the context of different material afterlives, some of the same intersections between temporalities discussed in Annette's case, but with

different effects. Their case's years-long standstill was an effect of the legal "sealing" of their home after Nina's death, in addition to negligence by their building's management company. Unlike Annette's estate, which though standing still had experienced the effects of entropic time, Joyce and Nina's material afterlives seemed truly suspended in time. This, along with the strange circumstances of mother and daughter's successive deaths, created an atmosphere of intense uneasiness on the day of our investigation. It was the apartment's complete standstill, a temporal product of this particular assemblage of law and things, that made our collective mood coalesce.

Joyce and Nina's case was referred to the PA's office by their building's new management company. The previous management company had let the apartment sit, its fees unpaid, for years. Part of the new management's job was to open up the vacant apartment and, eventually, to sell it off to a new owner. But because the police had sealed the apartment after Nina's death, only the Public Administrator could open it back up.

Roberto, the polite building manager, seemed as nervous as we were when we met that morning. On our way to the building's elevator, we passed two women, the younger one pushing a baby carriage. They were both dressed in floor-length embroidered jackets, wearing headscarves tied loosely around dark brown hair, the younger woman's long and the elder's short. I guessed, from their appearance, that they were Central Asian. The women looked similar, like mother and daughter. I smiled at them and they both smiled back, their gold teeth glinting in the bright lobby light. There was a large population of Central Asians living in this Brooklyn neighborhood. The two women looked happy, taking their baby for a stroll outside on that unseasonably warm March day. The three generations – baby, mother, and grandmother – contrasted directly

with the fates of Joyce and Nina, who had lived in the very same building. Not only did their baby signal the continued and future vitality of their family line, but they belonged to a new and burgeoning immigrant group in the neighborhood, while Joyce and Nina were the descendants of generations-old Italian immigrants, a demographic once common but now waning in the area.

The green NYPD sticker was still pasted over the entrance to Joyce and Nina's apartment, sealing it from intruders. Pablo took a photo of the sticker and then quickly ripped it off. A spell was broken: the apartment suddenly unfroze and time restarted under the hand of the law (Greenhouse 1996). Roberto unlocked and opened the door. We walked into the apartment, bracing ourselves. Pablo expected, and our observations confirmed, that the apartment did not contain anything of resaleable value. Unlike Annette's house, therefore, our presence in the apartment that day was not, for us, characterized by any progression towards liquidating their assets.

Over the course of the investigation, we experienced, as Kathleen Stewart (2011) writes, "a collective saturation of the senses" (Stewart, 2011: 449). A certain kind of atmosphere was made palpable by being with the objects in Joyce and Nina's home – their material afterlives, made strange, first, by death, and, then, by the passage of time. Stewart describes the feeling of a charged atmosphere as "atmospheric attunement" (Stewart, 2011: 445). Using Stewart's language, which she uses to describe everyday scenes in her life, the apartment was "abuzz" with some feeling, some "intensity… [in] the air [we] breathed" (Stewart, 2011: 447). Pablo and I both expressed an awareness of an uneasy force in the apartment. The concept of atmospheric attunement is particularly relevant here because it focuses on how charged atmospheres are created by people moving through ordinary

material, built environments. Jason Throop's (2014) concept of mood as an "intermediary experience" (Throop, 2014: 70) of "moral evaluation" (Throop, 2014: 74) is also pertinent. Like Stewart's atmosphere, "moods contribute to a feeling of what is around…a surrounding influence which does not quite generate its own form" (Throop, 2014: 70). It is useful to add the concept of mood to atmosphere because Throop's formulation, unlike Stewart's, emphasizes the moral/ethical undertone of this not-quite generated form or feeling. Finally, Joyce and Nina's case ethnographically demonstrates the strong affect that may attend material afterlives. This attendant affect has been explored ethnographically by Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009), among others. But unlike Navaro-Yashin's work, which looks at the aftermath of wartime destruction in Cyprus, the affect here is not melancholy, but rather a general uneasiness that is both personal and communal.

Joyce and Nina's home was full of family photos and the kinds of objects considered typical of older American women: Hummel figurines, a framed cat poster, a tea cozy shaped like a giant strawberry. Different family generations were memorialized in photos around their home. A large photo collage hung above the living room mantle: a few portraits from the 1950s or 60s; a photo of an old couple in the 1970s; a recent picture of a young woman at the beach; and a middle-aged couple with their arms around the same young woman. On one side of the collage there was a large group portrait of a family reunion. On the other side, there was a photo of what looked like three generations — grandparents, parents, and their children, sitting in the woods in summer. Who and where were the other people in these photos? Were they all gone, passed away before Joyce and Nina? Did the mother's and daughter's deaths end a family line, erased in the same apartment in the course of two years? The presence of these objects and photographs

recalled generational time in a place where generational time had been twisted and broken. A daughter was not supposed to die less than a year after her mother, in the same intimate living space. Yet these photos and objects spoke of a healthy, robust series of family generations on vacations and celebrating holidays together. That strange disconnect between what we saw and what we knew contributed to the atmosphere and mood. Like Roland Barthes' (1981) "Winter Garden" photograph of his mother in *Camera Lucida*, these photos struck at our cores because we were simultaneously experiencing the photos' contexts – Joyce and Nina's lives – and their fates – to be forgotten and left alone in an apartment for years, marking the end of Joyce and Nina's family line.

The living room had served as a bedroom, a single-sized bed in one corner, made up with flowery bedsheets. There was a long coffee table next to the bed with an open can of Welch's grape juice and an empty box of Newport menthol cigarettes. There was a bottle of water, lying on its side next to a black plastic ashtray. It looked as if someone had just been there, drinking a can of juice and smoking cigarettes while watching the TV, or maybe looking through the windows that opened onto a view of the Verrazano Bridge.



It looked as if Joyce or Nina had just been magically abducted from the living room, mid-puff. Though both mother and daughter had passed, their personhoods lingered through the objects they lived with and on which they left their traces. The fact that two years had passed and their traces were still so vividly apparent was disorienting to me and Pablo.

In Alfred Gell's writing on Marquesan funerary practice, the personhood of the deceased is believed to reside in their "material objects, traces and leavings" (Gell, 1998: 225) well after their biological death. The deceased is only truly laid to rest once a carving that is believed to contain their dispersed agency is ceremonially "killed" during a mortuary

ritual (Gell, 1998). Was this lack of ritual what had created the sense of uneasiness? In Annette's house, there had been no family ritual, but some care was taken of her things when she died. Perhaps this was why we did not feel as uneasy in Annette's home as we did in Joyce and Nina's. Maybe this lack of any ritual, any rearrangement, any movement, made us uneasy because it felt ethically suspect. Or perhaps it was because entropic time – which had so obviously affected Annette's home – seemed to be suspended here. The law's desire for a complete standstill had seemingly been satisfied, and its effects were disturbing.

I walked over to the master bedroom. There was a wooden box open on the bed. The box was filled with drug paraphernalia. We knew that Nina had overdosed, and the arrangement of the drugs and papers and pipes on the bed in a box looked almost too perfect, as if we had walked onto the set of a movie about the dangers of drug use. Wearing latex gloves, I carefully sorted through the contents of the box. There was a small piece of some dark substance, wrapped in wax paper and sealed with a sticker that read "La Cura" – the cure. Heroin, I thought.



A bathroom was attached to the master bedroom, its entrance blocked by a mess of dark, bloodstained bedsheets. I instantly recognized what this meant. Nina had died at home and, by the time she was discovered, her body had started to release fluids. When the police and medical examiner came to recover her body, they used the bedsheets to move her, clean up, and cover the mess. This was their standard practice. Nina, her box of drugs open on the bed and the TV on, must have been in the adjoining bathroom when she passed. I leaned into the entrance, taking a cursory look around. There was nothing to be found in there, only more linens, toiletries, and the intense smell of death.

I walked back to the side of the bed and looked through the nightstand, where I found some pieces of mail, a lighter, and an old cellphone. On top of the nightstand there

was a half-empty bottle of water, a mystery novel, and a pair of reading glasses. Again, the tableau was so vivid: a person, sitting on the bed, drinking a bottle of water, reading a mystery story. This tableau, the arrangement of drug paraphernalia, the blood-stained bedsheets, and the Newport cigarettes next to the Welch's grape juice. These were material afterlives that, because of the law and contingent circumstances, stood completely still, seemingly, since before the moment of death. All of these things, eerily clear and present but arranged years in the past, created an uneasy atmosphere. Perhaps this was because they did not feel like material afterlives – they felt like material *lives* – and yet, the people who had moved them, arranged them, lived with them, were both dead. Why had entropic time not changed the scene at all? Was it the climate control in this modern coop building? Even the TV in the bedroom was on – not to a channel to but to a wobbling grey screen.

I returned to the living room, where Roberto was looking at his phone and Pablo was finishing up the investigation. Pablo was ready to release the apartment to Roberto to be cleaned out. Later on, the apartment would be sold by a real estate broker, its profits deposited in Nina's estate account for the benefit of distant relatives. I opened the door to the balcony and stepped outside into the sun. This was Joyce and Nina's view. I took off my mask and gloves. The metal balcony was old and rusty but the day was pleasant and the sun felt warm on my face. Though the apartment inside had been untouched for two years, time had continued outside: the weather changed, the sun moved, cars lurched along in traffic, boats traveled under the bridge, and people walked in and out of their homes.

Annette, Joyce and Nina

The cases I present here offer examples of how, after death, legal and extralegal temporalities get made and perpetuated through material objects, how these temporalities intersect, and how they affect the people who experience them.

While legal temporalities may be used strategically sometimes – like by Oleg in Annette's story – they were, in my experience, rarely used for strategic or political advantage. Instead, they were created and perpetuated by contingent circumstances, legal precedent, human error, and miscommunication: a whole complex of specific practices and situations.

The frequent intersection of legal and extralegal temporalities created many of the most interesting and frustrating moments in the PA's work. In Annette's case, the collision of *standstill* and *entropic time*, articulated through the material environment of her home, directly undermined PA's legal fiction of an intact estate. In Joyce and Nina's case, *standstill* and *generational time* collided to produce an intensely uneasy atmosphere. And in the long, drawn-out nature of the PA's obscure bureaucratic work with material documents, *generational time* and the constant alternation between *standstill* and *progression* came up against each other.

And yet the most disturbing element in these two stories is the instance of complete and utter standstill we find in Joyce and Nina's apartment: somehow, no entropy had visibly disturbed the scene. The fact that nothing had moved or changed while their apartment was legally sealed was an ideal scenario according to a legal logic. A legal temporality had been left completely untouched by extralegal time. And yet seeing everything seemingly exactly as it was at Nina's death was profoundly disorienting. It was

the absence of extralegal time that created the uncanny atmosphere, the strangest, most disturbed mood. I am left wondering why this is. What makes certain material expressions of temporalities merely frustrating, but others deeply disturbing? What gives them such emotional or affectual valence? And why is it that the pure expression of a legal temporality – a perfect enaction of standstill – was so unsettling?

Part 2: The Ethics of Time

Annette, Joyce, and Nina's cases highlight the complexities produced by the convergences of legal and extra-legal temporalities. The work of the PA itself moves according to alternating temporalities: urgency and dormancy. In the work of the PA these contrasting temporalities have ethical implications. To be ethical, work needs to be done at a certain pace and according to a certain schedule.

Why is it that in the practice of law some periods of time are filled with urgency while, at other times, a case is left to linger for years before any resolution? This is by no means unique to the PA's practice of intestate administration, although there are certainly peculiarities of intestate administration that shape the transition between these different paces and rhythms of work.

Urgency and Dormancy

What characterizes *urgency*, in general? For an action to be urgent, it needs to happen as soon as possible, and to be done as quickly as possible. Urgency applies to an action, a process, doing something over time. It can be single action that takes little time, or it can be a series of actions in a process. "Urgency" is a mode of action/being that is directed towards

completing something, towards achieving an end or a resolution. Urgency also translates into a feeling. This can be understood from the expression "a sense of urgency." It is both an emotional and a physical sense, though the nature and degree of each varies. The emotional sense that accompanies urgency is one of anticipation, perhaps of nervousness, a speeding up of the nervous system. With this psychological state comes the physical sense of urgency. For someone to do something with a sense of urgency, they may move their body quickly. Their heart might beat faster, or, in some cases, a sense of calm and complete presence – being in "the zone" – may come over them. Urgency is a mode of action with an accelerated pace that includes all of these characteristics, both emotional and physical.

How, then, can we describe the long periods of waiting and inaction before, between, and after periods of urgency? These periods are not characterized by a feeling of constant awareness, nor of constant anticipation. During these periods of waiting, a person rarely feels that they are waiting. Rather, the future event or action is temporarily forgotten. There is no feeling of anticipation; there is a total lack of urgency. One may be aware of some action coming in the future, but this awareness only flickers into the front of the mind occasionally; most of the time it is absent. What word describes this kind of attitude, this kind of temporality? The word cannot be waiting because waiting implies a constant awareness that there is something one is waiting for. Instead, I choose the word *dormant*, or dormancy, to describe this period of time. "Dormant" suggests that the event, issue, or action is merely asleep. Because it is asleep, it is not pressing, it is not on one's mind, but at the same time it has not completely disappeared – it will reawaken at some point.

Urgency and dormancy are socially constructed and socially situated temporal modes, or temporalities. Each way of existing in time and progressing through time is based

on specific social relations, obligations, and rules. It therefore matters – a lot – who or which institution is performing and experiencing what kind of temporality. The very different positions of the State and others involved in a case – in terms of both power and perspective – influence how and when these temporal modes prevail.

Urgency and dormancy in the PA's work

What do urgency and dormancy look like in the work of the PA's office? At any moment of time at the PA's office, some cases are urgent while many others are dormant. For a case manager or investigator, urgent cases are on their radar. Let us say a case is referred to the PA's office, and the office manager, who is charge of distributing cases, has emailed an investigator and asked them to go out on an investigation into the case. Setting up an investigation and completing it has now become urgent. The investigator looks through this new decedents' case file, gathering all the details about the decedent that are available. They make phone calls to set up appointments and try to go out on an investigation as soon as possible. After the investigation is over, they write up a report and submit the report to their supervisor. Follow-up investigations might be necessary, in which case more trips to the field are scheduled, and more reports are drafted, signed, and delivered. For this member of the PA's office – the investigator – urgency looks like this flurry of activity, focusing on a few select cases, both in and outside of the office. Once all of this work is done, the investigator allows the case to lay dormant on their end. If the decedent owned any property, the case may return many months later, before the PA's office holds a real estate auction. Then the case suddenly becomes urgent again – especially depending on how much time is left before the auction. The investigator goes back out to the same house or apartment, rounds up property

clean-out bidders, and writes at least one more report. The decedent, their house, and their personal property might again become a topic of conversation around the office. Once the (now empty) house or apartment is sold at auction, the investigator moves onto other cases.

At this point, however, the case becomes urgent for the Public Administrator and their deputy. These two heads of the office help to negotiate real estate closings, which are big business for everyone involved: estate distributees, lawyers, and the PA's office itself. The stakes are high because real estate means a lot of money. The day that the real estate closing happens, the office looks and feels different. There are strangers in suits walking in and out all day long. An often-empty room called "the library" has been cleaned up and is being used all day for the closing. The PA and deputy are dressed up in suits and are expected to be busy. Once in a while someone rushes out of "the library" and asks for photocopies. There is a certain novelty to this day. Its urgent moments have a particular pace and look: bodies rush in and out; new faces appear in the office; and people are dressed in particular ways. There is a sense of occasion and an atmosphere of tension. Before the closing is completed, there is also a feeling of uncertainty: people go into and emerge from the library looking nervous, maybe pulling someone out with them to chat quietly in the hallway. When new people come into the office, they are greeted formally by the PA and their deputy; introductions between interested parties and attorneys are made; there is a formality not only in the way people are dressed, but also in the way that they speak, sit, stand, and move. Urgency has a look, pace, and emotional valence, created through particular social and legal expectations.

The way that urgency looks and feels, and its particular rhythm, change according to context. Urgency is different for the investigation teams than for the PA and deputy, because of their distinct positions and stakes in decedents' cases. Nevertheless, there is a certain

similarity to the way that urgency appears in both positions: work is done rapidly; documents, electronically and on paper, are consulted, written, filled out, photocopied, and signed; urgent work involves interacting with other non-agency personnel in person in particular ways, with certain body language; and specific styles of clothing are worn, along with certain tools and accessories. The PA and deputy wear suits to meetings while the investigators and their assistants wear durable clothes, face masks, and gloves to field investigations. These periods of urgency, then, are not only characterized by speed, patterns of thought, and emotion, but also by certain material elements of work culture: clothing, body language, and the production, exchange, and presence of documents.

After all the elements of a real estate closing are successfully completed, the estate may fall into a long period of dormancy. Major estate assets have been liquidated and distributees contacted, so the Public Administrator has little left to do. The case will reappear when it is closed via the Final Accounting. The period of drafting, editing, and signing the Final Accounting is, like the real estate closing, another urgent time for the PA and their deputy. It is once again characterized by the writing and exchange of documents, electronically and on paper, by speed, and of formality. But until this stage, the estate may lay dormant for years, in the hands of the PA's contracted attorneys and the decedent's distributees, should any exist.

It is harder to describe the look, feel, and rhythm of dormancy, which is characterized by an absence of activity. But at the PA's office, while some cases lay dormant, other cases inevitably became urgent. Therefore, periods of case-specific dormancy do not appear dormant. There are always investigations going on, there are always new cases coming in and older cases coming back. From both an office-wide and an employee-specific perspective,

the sense of urgency is constant. If the work of the office is looked at from the perspective of single cases, however, then these periods of dormancy become apparent, as do the sudden, abrupt transitions between dormancy and urgency.

As an ethnographer, single estate cases, because they allowed me to dwell in detail on decedents' life and death stories, as well as the PA's investigative and narrative-making techniques, became my standard unit of analysis. This began to emerge during my own fieldnote-writing process and continued during the process of rewriting and reconsidering my fieldwork. It was where my attention naturally went. And this was no great surprise: why does the TV show Law and Order dwell on one case per episode? There is something satisfying about looking at a single person's story – it feels natural and comfortable to focus on a single narrative arc. Looking from this perspective, these sudden swings between urgency and dormancy became, for me, real analytical concerns. Periods of dormancy suddenly looked very prominent in the life of an estate, and therefore puzzled and interested me. For my PA colleagues, who worked on a constant influx of new cases, this perspective – focusing on one case in particular – was irrelevant. As an ethnographer trying to follow certain decedent cases in detail, though, this perspective became important to me. It was also important to outsiders who viewed the PA's work on a case-by-case basis.

The long periods of dormancy that were inevitable in single decedent cases both made sense and frustrated me. Annette's case began with a three-year period of dormancy, during which very little was done to actually settle her estate. After her burial, her cousins spent three years on a failed attempt to gain administrator rights. It seemed incredible to me that three years would pass – a delay that I felt could have been easily avoided if the rules of

administration had been more widely known. The more I learned about Annette's estate, the more I felt frustrated by this three-year delay. So much time had been wasted.

And then, later, when I began cashing out Annette's investments, I discovered that I could easily participate and fall into in these periods of dormancy myself. It was easier to feel frustrated by things that happened when I was not involved. But actually doing the work of estate administration revealed to me how dormancy could easily happen. Documents required to cash out accounts had to be filled out in certain ways and sent by mail. These forms were often rejected, and at the PA's office we had to resubmit them until they were finally accepted, the account was cashed out, and the office was sent a check to deposit into the decedent's estate account. All this took such a long time: months or even years. Some accounts were smaller than others, and if you were handling other, bigger cases, you ignored these smaller accounts for as long as they could be ignored. And if the case was not approaching the "final accounting" phase, then there was no big rush to get all the little stuff settled. The final accounting had to be agreed to by distributees' counsels and the Surrogate's Court. There were many parties, therefore, that had to sign on to the final accounting. The PA, the attorneys, and the court were also considering many other cases, which had to be scheduled on the court's calendar, and which had their own dramas and priorities. Meanwhile in the office, I got tired of trying to get through to large investment companies that could not wrap their heads around the idea of a public estate administrator existing in place of a private estate executor. I moved on to other, more meaningful tasks. And so Annette's case continued for years. I found, due to the nature of the work, that I could easily allow this to happen – and also that this happened not because of one person, but rather because of many people juggling many things.

Why do things become urgent? Why do they become dormant? In other words, how are these temporalities produced?

What governs the swing *between* urgency and dormancy?

A case becomes urgent when it is designated as such by people who have the authority to do so. Urgency emerges from outside expectations. For instance, when a case is first referred to the office it is urgent to conduct an investigation because that is what is expected by the higher-ups in the PA's office, the Surrogate's court, and the agency or people who refer the case. This is the *hierarchical* reason: you must do this thing quickly because the boss says so. But while working urgently you may not think about bureaucratic hierarchy at all. Even so, there is usually somebody else who is present, a supervisor, who cares that the activity is getting done quickly. If there is no "other" expecting something, then a case will, most of the time, quickly settle into dormancy. So the presence of some kind of *other* in a position of authority is essential to making work urgent.

At the same time, some work becomes urgent because that is simply the practice: investigations always take place soon after referrals. Certain paces of work, certain temporalities, emerge as routine, as the regular way of doing things. The need to do something urgently is not given a second thought, it is just what one does. This reason is based on *routine* and no further reflection is needed.

Underlying the hierarchical and the routine are the more *substantive* reasons for doing activities urgently. By substantive I mean the reasons that certain paces of work correspond to certain activities.

My colleagues told me that the first thing they absolutely had to do during an investigation was to find enough assets to bury an unburied decedent. This was one aspect of the PA's work that was urgent because it was ethically important. *The pace of the work was connected to its moral value.* In some cases, a decedent's body was not yet "officially identified," meaning that the investigators had yet to find some identifying piece of biological information, like dental or medical records, which would confirm the official identity of the deceased and allow their body to be buried. It was an absolute moral imperative to either find proof of official identity or to find assets, because everyone deserved a decent and timely burial. This was repeated over and over to me by my colleagues.

Once a decedent was buried, however, what was the *substantive* reason for urgently working on their estate? For cases in this stage of administration, my colleagues no longer articulated clear and powerful moral imperatives.

For cases in which there were no loved ones or family members to accompany, and in which the decedent had already been buried – which were most estates – the reason for urgency was different. To understand what may merit a certain urgency, it is necessary to look at what issues or processes are prioritized during most typical/common investigations. The highest priority in these investigations, when the decedent is already buried and no loved ones are present, is given to assessment of what kinds of *assets* the decedent had and whether there is any *family*. If there is any chance that there might be a *will* lying around somewhere, searching thoroughly for the will becomes extremely important because a valid will would mean that the PA has to vacate the role of estate administrator as quickly as possible. These are the three issues that drive most PA investigations: assets, family, and a will.

These three reasons do not emerge from a moral imperative to care for the dead, but they are highly important in the PA's work. Figuring out the extent of a decedent's assets determines what kind of priority will be given to their estate by the PA's office and by its associated contractors and agencies. Determining whether there are family members is important because if close family members are indeed found, the estate administrator role may be transferred to them. Finding more distant family members determines how many distributees the estate will ultimately have. And finding a valid will of course will relieve the PA of its responsibilities. All these reasons, then, help to plan the future course of an investigation: will it be worth a lot of money, will there be real estate, will there be family members, or will the PA have to give the case over to someone else?

Ultimately, then, the substantive reason behind most investigative work is quite practical: this *work is done urgently in order to plan for further work*. It is urgent to plan, to make an initial road map. *The substantive reason is to determine and ease workflow.* Once plans are made based on an overall sketch of the estate, things can settle down.

Sometimes, however, PA colleagues simply decided independently that certain work was urgent based on their own feelings. For instance, Quentin, a case manager, decided to make a special effort in one decedent's case. This decedent had died at an advanced age and had lived alone in a small apartment. As a Korean American man who had grown up in Hawaii, he was demographically different from our typical decedents. Additionally, he was Ba'hai, a religion that Quentin had never heard of before. Quentin took it upon himself to arrange a Ba'hai ceremony for the decedent's burial, taking a special trip to the New York City Ba'hai Center for the proper religious paraphernalia. Getting the decedent buried was

always an urgent activity, but this case was particularly important to Quentin, who appeared to take great satisfaction in respecting the wishes of this decedent.

Ethics of dormancy and urgency as the dominant temporalities of legal practice

Outside auditors were often brought in to improve PA practices; frequently this meant criticizing how much time it took to resolve estate cases. In news articles about the "inefficient" or "negligent" practices of the PA, timing and a slow pace were frequently identified as morally suspect. Excessive "dormancy," therefore, was unethical; cases had to be closed "urgently" in order to recover the PA's moral standing as a public-serving institution.

Auditors constantly came back to the PA, urging more efficient practices, more cases closed more rapidly. At one point, I became involved in a large push to close many small cases at once, to satisfy these overseers. These cases had not been closed because they each had a single piece of unclaimed property in the office's vault. Once a list of these cases had been generated, I looked at each item and each estate to which it corresponded. If there was a next of kin, I wrote a letter giving them a finite amount of time to pick up the unclaimed property. After this period of time, the property would be donated.

In the course of this work, I encountered many strange little items corresponding to old cases that had never been closed. Most of these items had no monetary value, and they had usually been found on the body of the deceased. A cheap metallic chain. A Scooby Doo watch. A pair of dentures. I found it amazing that anyone was expected to pick up this stuff, but if it had been on the deceased's body, then perhaps it once had sentimental value to the

deceased's loved ones. As my letters were sent out and went unanswered, these objects were donated to Goodwill (the dentures were thrown out).

Case after case was closed and the auditors were satisfied, at least for that month. But what did this effort really accomplish? Even if cases are not closed and lie dormant for years, are there actually any ethical consequences? Consider the many small estates that I helped to close. The auditors, who did not look at specific cases but rather reviewed agency numbers at particular moments throughout the years, wanted better numbers. They wanted to see that the PA was closing cases – not allowing long periods of dormancy in so many of the agency's cases. The small estate/personal property project was set up in order to improve these numbers. The implication was that, with "better numbers," the PA would look like a more ethically upright, well-functioning agency. Cases came in and were closed in large numbers. But the fact that these cases had still technically been open: did it actually matter?

These decedents had been laid to rest; everything else had been settled. Because these were small estates (meaning less than $35,000), there was no formal "Final Accounting". For most of these cases, a letter had already been sent to the next of kin asking them to pick up the deceased's personal property, and no one had showed up. So did it matter that these cases had not been closed, that a single Scooby Doo watch was still sitting in the PA's vault? *Would the deceased have cared? And is this the right question to ask?* And yet, when presented with these improved numbers, the overseers were satisfied that the PA had improved its practices and would be seen more generously by the public.

The numbers looked good and numbers could be very powerful. But was there, perhaps, other work that could have been done instead of that project? Were there other estates in need of urgent attention that would not quickly generate good numbers? Was the

lack of attention to these other estates perhaps a more egregious ethical failure? That is, was the urgency with which we treated the Scooby Doo case actually an unethical use of time? Had the Scooby Doo case been allowed to lay dormant, and other cases been treated with urgency, then perhaps we, as the PA, might have better served the public.

Chapter 2 | Narratives as Ethnography

The PA's work is narrative based; in other words, it relies on stories about people to get things done. These narratives are constructed from two kinds of clues: a decedent's material possessions and living space, and from the stories that people who knew the decedent – family, friends, neighbors, superintendents, building managers – share with PA workers. As an anthropologist, my work is also narrative based. To write down my experiences as fieldnotes, transform these into written vignettes, and compose chapters of a dissertation, I also need to have a narrative that makes a certain kind of sense. The anthropological project is different from the PA's, but our projects sometimes intersect. And they intersected in my position as both a PA employee and an anthropologist studying the PA's work.

What can the PA's work as ethnographers – that is, their work of building formal and informal narratives through investigation – reveal about how people who live alone experience their final days?

Mr. Berman

"Did you know the old man who lived in apartment 1F?" Pablo asked.

"Oh, the Jewish guy?"

"Yes," Pablo explained. "He passed away. We're here from the City to look at his apartment. Do you know if he has any family?"

The neighbor looked surprised. "I don't know!" he responded. "Wow, the Jewish guy died?"

"Yeah," Pablo said. "In October."

"Damn." The neighbor shook his head. He opened the lobby door, letting us in. Pablo turned to me, mouthing, "*The Jewish guy?!"*

Water was leaking from Mr. Berman's apartment into the basement and only the Public Administrator could legally break the green New York Police Department (NYPD) seal on his door. Getting into the apartment was tricky because the cops who sealed it off after Mr. Berman died installed an unusual lock and no one could find the key.

Pablo, Carol, and I visited Mr. Berman's home two months after he passed. I was just beginning my main stretch of fieldwork after spending two summers at the PA's office. It was December. In the lobby, "Feliz Navidad" played from a large boombox while a toy Santa gyrated his hips. After the investigation, on our way back to the office, the three of us posed for a selfie in front of the Christmas display.

We met Patrick, the building's super, outside of Mr. Berman's first floor apartment. Patrick introduced himself to us; he lived on the second floor with his wife and children. A locksmith joined us a few minutes later. Pablo removed the seal from the door, Carol took a picture for the office's records, and the locksmith went to work.

At this point, all we could do was wait. Carol, Pablo, and I stood around with Patrick and chatted. It was a slow morning in the building and a small crowd began to gather around us. Hearing the commotion in the hallway, two handymen working in the apartment next door came out to watch. Dane, a young man who worked for the building's management company, happened to be visiting and joined us as well. I smiled; watching the locksmith open Mr. Berman's door had become an event.

While we waited for the locksmith to finish working, Patrick told us about Mr. Berman.

"He was one of the oldest, if not *the* oldest tenant in the building. I think he was living here since the 1950s. He was really old and sick when he died, always in and out of the hospital. You know, a few years ago I saved his life. One day I smelled smoke in the building, so I went downstairs and there was all this smoke coming from his apartment. I knocked on the door and he didn't answer. Then I knocked again, he still didn't answer. So I ran and got my key to his place and opened the door. He was just sitting there on his couch eating ice cream while the kitchen was on fire! His face was covered in ashes. I started yelling at him, 'Look there's a fire! Get out!' but he didn't move, he didn't hear anything or pay attention, he just kept eating ice cream. So I ran over and tried to get him up. I remember when I got close to him, his arms and the whole side of his face was bruised, like he had fallen. Finally I had to pull him out and he was, like, two hundred pounds. It was not easy, you can see I'm not a big guy. Then I called the fire department."

"Wow," Pablo said, and Carol shook her head.

"After that I knew he couldn't live alone. My family, my kids live in the building. He was a danger to the other tenants. I had to make sure they were safe. So then after the fire department came, and he went to the hospital, I called the city and explained the situation. They gave him a guardian, who sued the city and won big, he got 24-hour care in his home. The city sent a team of nurses to take care of him. I honestly don't know how those ladies moved him around every day. They each couldn't have weighed more than 110 pounds. He passed out once and they couldn't lift him up so I had to help them out, but usually

they did it by themselves! And you know he was a pretty big guy, like 200 pounds and more than 6 feet tall."

While Patrick talked, the locksmith continued to struggle with the door, and went back to his van several times to pick up new equipment. Pablo looked at me and rolled his eyes. He thought the locksmith was incompetent.

Dane jumped into the conversation.

"Yeah, my grandfather is really old and losing it. It drives my family crazy. He just turned 90 and has Alzheimer's but he kept driving until, like, last year. We kept telling him not to drive, but he would do it anyway. One day he was at the office in Queens and he tried to drive back home to Brooklyn! We had no idea where he was. He could have been dead. Then my mom got a call, like, three hours later from a police precinct in *downtown Manhattan*. They found him driving around Alphabet City … when they stopped him, he couldn't even tell them his own name! They searched him and found a business card with her phone number on it, so they called her."

"That's so scary," I said. "I remember when my grandfather wandered outside and got lost."

Dane shook his head. "He just won't stop. After that the DMV revoked his license, but you know when they do that they don't actually take your physical license away. So then sometimes even after that he would find his license and think that he was allowed to drive. Finally, we had to take the battery out of his car to make him stop."

Dane turned to Pablo, Carol, and me. "He bought this building and, like, ten other buildings, in the 50s, so I work for his company, technically. Now he's not driving anymore, but he still comes to the office four days a week. A lot of the time he doesn't really know

what's going on and he gets angry. When he's in the office, like today, I go out to check on properties."

The locksmith picked up a drill from his bag and all conversation ceased as he loudly drilled out the lock. The door banged open and we all looked at each other and clapped. "Finally!" Pablo muttered.

Our conversations with Patrick, Dane, and Mr. Berman's other neighbors, for example, helped us put together his narrative. These kinds of exchanges happened often during investigations. They were not formally planned and very much depended on who was there that day, who let us in to the decedent's home, and what kind of building and community the decedent had lived in. In other words, chance and timing determined what stories we collected. The fact that the locksmith hired to open Mr. Berman's door was seemingly incompetent gave us plenty of time to hang out with Patrick and Dane, meet other people from the building, and have a wide-ranging conversation about Mr. Berman and old age in general.

How are clues collected and put together by the PA in order to construct a coherent life narrative? Over the course of a case, the PA's employees fashion these clues into narratives that are legible to a particular legal and bureaucratic logic. While certain clues are translated into formal narratives such as typed investigation reports, court documents, and entries into the case management system, many more are carried along informally, in frequent conversations and shared memories between PA coworkers.

Pieces of Patrick's story about Mr. Berman would make it into the investigation report that Pablo would type up the next day: for example, that Patrick had told us that Mr. Berman was an incapacitated person and was being taken care of by a team of nurses provided by the city. This investigation report would be seen by the case manager and, perhaps, by Bill. This and other investigation reports would eventually be reviewed in the future as certain required legal filings were completed for Mr. Berman's estate. And finally, this series of "formal" written documents would conclude with Mr. Berman's Final Accounting. Though this series of written narratives may be *visible* to outsiders – the courts, attorneys, supervising agencies, auditors, the public, a decedent's family – following along this entire process are the informal, unwritten, personal narratives exchanged between colleagues about cases. The informal narratives reflected the full experience of estate administration and determined how the formal ones got made.

In fact, the PA's work of narrative making is a kind of "thin" ethnography (Jackson Jr. 2013). For each case, PA employees become immersed – as much as they can be – in the social world left behind by a decedent. The process of investigation and case management, then, is a kind of ethnographic research that reveals the realities and intricacies of certain social phenomena. It is also is a particular type of ethnographic research, akin to archeology, that depends heavily on material objects, using them as clues to reconstruct a life narrative and social world. It is "thin" ethnography because the time spent in each decedent's world and the scope of that world is necessarily limited. As an anthropologist of the PA's work, I want to use the ethnographic data I collected together with the PA in order to better understand a variety of social phenomena.

Though the scope of the PA's work is more limited than the scope of most anthropologists' work, the narratives both genres work with and produce are always incomplete. Narratives, by nature, *feel* complete, they are based on a fiction of wholeness and coherence. The PA's decedent narrative, in order to stand up in court, in order to put an individual "to rest," must be presented as complete and coherent. An anthropological narrative must also appear complete and coherent. But the scope of either project is limited by time and by the goals, presence, and perspective of the PA employee/anthropologist.

During the process of estate administration, PA employees, as "thin" ethnographers, learn a lot about how people who live alone experience their final days. As a PA employee and anthropologist of the PA's work, I examine some of the stories we collected in the field in order to better understand what these final days might look like. In other words, I use the ethnographic data collected by PA employees in order to pursue my own questions as an anthropologist. Importantly, the ethnographic data I examine was also collected by me, an anthropologist. Therefore, the ethnography presented here has multiple layers of authorship.

"Thin" ethnography, or "thin description," is an expression borrowed from John Jackson Jr.'s ethnography of African Hebrew Israelites (Jackson Jr. 2013). In Jackson Jr.'s ethnography, the ethnographer's description is "thin" rather than "thick" because of the limits of anthropological sense-making (Geertz 1973). That is, even though Clifford Geertz writes frequently in *The Interpretation of Cultures* about the limits of what the anthropologist can truly know, Jackson Jr. emphasizes these limits even further. Moreover, Jackson Jr. argues that these limits in anthropological knowledge cannot be overcome by self-reflection but are simply limits that must be accepted by the

ethnographer (Rouse 2015). This concept is useful for thinking about the PA's work. The PA's own "thin ethnography" is characterized by an open acceptance of the limits of knowledge about decedents. It is therefore "thin" not only because PA workers simply do not have the time or the disciplinary mandate to linger on single cases, but because the clear limits of PA knowledge about decedents are, like Jackson Jr. suggests, accepted as fact. The PA's "thin" ethnography is different from Jackson Jr.'s, however, because PA workers do not critically consider the limits of their knowledge. This is, again, a function of their limited time and, above all, their different disciplinary expectations.

The front door finally open, we walked into Mr. Berman's apartment. His home was clean; his nurses kept things tidy. Because Mr. Berman had around-the-clock care, he was taken to the hospital at the first sign of a serious problem and passed away there. He was buried soon after by his guardian, a court-appointed caretaker who handled Mr. Berman's affairs since he was not capable of taking care of them himself. This meant that, legally, Mr. Berman was an incapacitated person who could not handle his own finances and other decision-making.

The front hallway of Mr. Berman's apartment was covered with signs, notes, and instructions about his care. "Please keep client's nails short," one note advised. "Be sure he is fully cleaned after a BM." "Mr. Berman needs to drink more liquids. Do not purchase foods with high sodium. Offer fruit to Mr. Berman." "Mr. Berman cannot be left alone at any time. Report all falls and seizures!"

"Look at all of these," I said to Pablo and Carol, pointing to the notes on the wall. These signs showed a picture of a man under constant care who was completely incapacitated

by old age and dementia. It was heartening to see work dedicated to the old man's care, and to learn that the city was providing that care, but also scary to the observe the reality of old age so clearly exposed in front of us, in Mr. Berman's intimate space.

The living room had a large leather couch that faced a widescreen TV. There was a vase of plastic flowers by the window. Several framed photos sat on small tables around the apartment; one of a baseball team in the 1940s or 50s. Was Mr. Berman one of the men on this team? Another was a black and white portrait of a well-dressed middle-aged man. He was balding, wore a suit with a pocket square, and had a soft, kind expression on his face. Was *this* Mr. Berman?



Patrick inspected the leak in the bathroom. He had to mop up the mess and call the plumber. Meanwhile, Pablo, Carol and I began to search the apartment for the regular stuff of investigation: bills, IDs, legal documents, bank cards, and valuables. We found no big surprises: no will, no stash of money under the flowerpot, no hidden collection of antique watches. There was a small lockbox but no key, so Patrick helped us pry it open with a screwdriver. In it we found 64 dollars in cash, a bag of change, some old receipts. We counted the cash, placed it in the property bag[10], and sealed it shut.

Patrick complained to us about the lack of neighborliness "these days." His building, however, seemed like an exceptionally close community. Several neighbors walked into the apartment while we were there, asking after Mr. Berman. Many told us anecdotes about him. I had rarely seen such interest from neighbors during an investigation.

Patrick was obviously a well-loved character in his building, and an excellent super. The building was clean and well-maintained, and he had gone the extra mile with the holiday decorations in the lobby. It was through Patrick's intervention that Mr. Berman ultimately received the home healthcare that he needed.

What kinds of clues did we, as the PA, gather during our investigation? And, using these clues, what kinds of conclusions could I, as an anthropologist, make about how Mr. Berman died? In other words: *what can we learn about the way people die alone from the clues gathered by the PA?*

---

[10] A property bag is a large plastic bag used by the Public Administrator to store property collected during investigations. Once an investigation concludes for the day, the property bag is sealed with a no-tampering seal and brought back to the PA's office. At the office, the contents of the property bag are inventoried in the typed investigation report, valuables and cash are placed in the vault, and identifying documents such as IDs and personal mail are stored in the decedent's case folder.

Before their deaths some of the PA's decedents, like Mr. Berman, were incapacitated by old age, disease, mental illness, and dementia. These problems were exacerbated by living alone without help immediately available. Lacking robust connections to friends, family, and neighbors, these decedents allowed their homes to become hazards to themselves. In the place of the close family that might have surrounded them in generations past – or might have not – some of these decedents received assistance through other connections such as neighbors and government agencies that attend to the welfare of the elderly. The timing and extent of this intervention varied enormously among decedents, if it happened at all.

Mr. Berman, in comparison to other PA decedents, was particularly lucky. Because he lived in such a close-knit building community, Mr. Berman's neighbors knew who he was and were aware of his condition. The main difference between Mr. Berman's building and others' was Patrick. As a building resident, Patrick told us, he had no choice but to concern himself with Mr. Berman's well-being, because it affected the safety of others, including his own family. And Patrick was a good building superintendent – he kept the building clean and maintained the apartments. He also communicated easily with city government officials, as Pablo, Carol, and I had witnessed. Though Mr. Berman appeared to have no close family or friends, Patrick was the ideal neighbor, well-positioned to intervene in his care. While the details of how Mr. Berman obtained 24-hour in-home care were not made clear to us that day, we knew that he had been receiving this care for at least a few years before he died. Because there were nurses in his home at all times, Mr. Berman was taken to the hospital for treatment before he ultimately passed. Though many Americans and others claim that they would prefer to

die at home than in the hospital, I learned during my fieldwork that, especially for PA cases, it was preferable to pass away in a hospital. For PA decedents who lived alone, dying at home often meant that their body was not found for days or weeks.

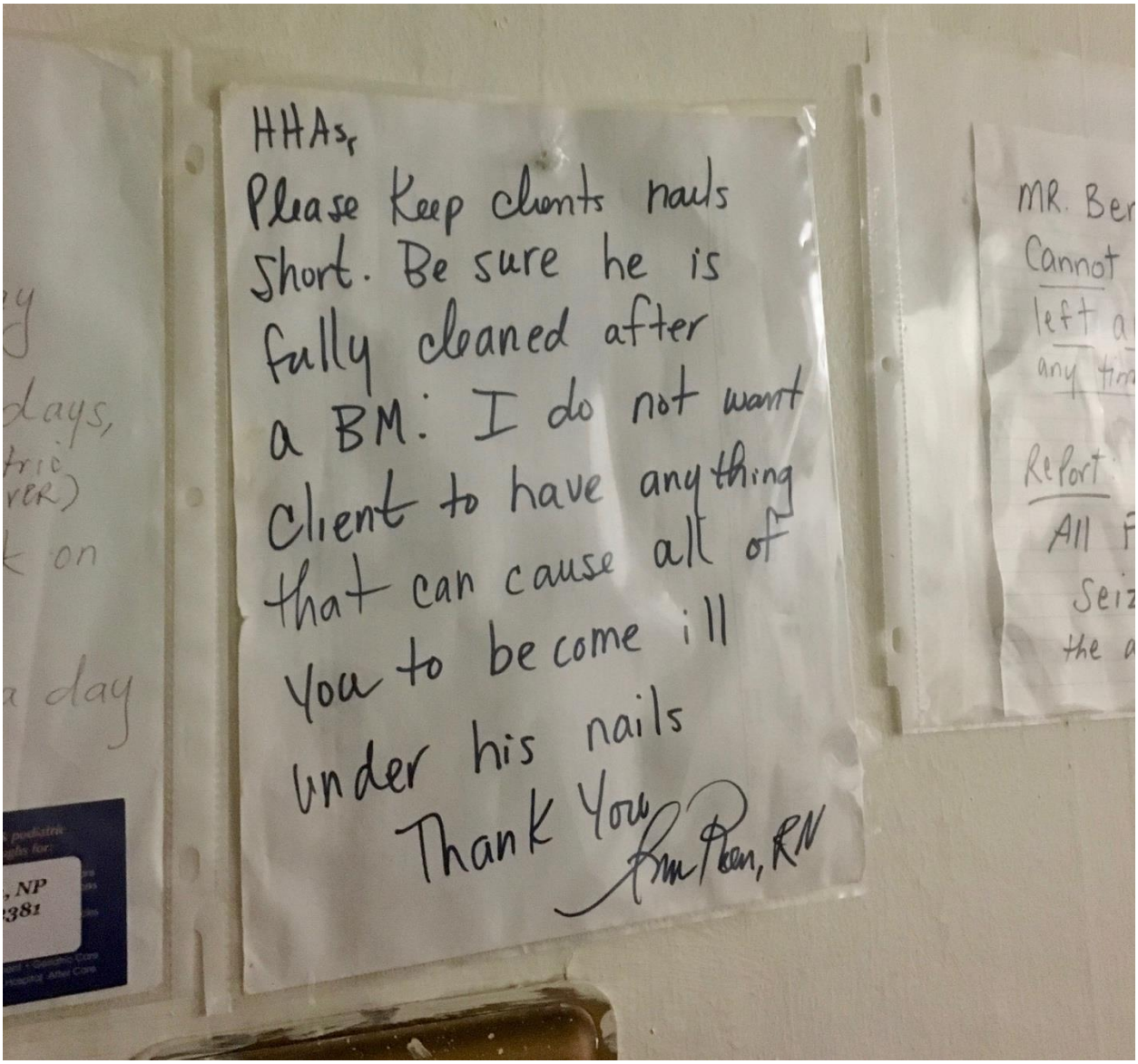
Mr. Berman, an elderly white Jewish man in declining health with severe dementia who lived in an apartment building, was easily deemed an urgent case in need of intervention. Many other decedents with declining physical and mental health were not recognized as urgent cases, and therefore did not receive the same kind of robust care. For instance, he was elderly, unlike some younger PA decedents who died alone suffering from mental illness. In the United States, there are social resources designated for the elderly. By virtue of his age, then, Mr. Berman was entitled to certain kinds of federal, state, and municipal care.

Mr. Berman also suffered a visible moment of public crisis. The smoke that Patrick saw under Mr. Berman's door was a public signal that Mr. Berman needed help. Had Mr. Berman lived in a house rather than an apartment, the smoke might not have been visible, and Mr. Berman might have even died in the fire, as I had seen in another PA case of an elderly person who lived alone in a house. But he lived in an apartment building, with neighbors frequently walking past. Living in a crowded city had, perhaps, saved his life.

Mr. Berman was also a white Jewish man, a demographic that held considerable power in New York City in particular. Though, as the PA, we did not know exactly how his whiteness or Jewishness affected the kind of care he received, these characteristics certainly may have helped him, even in not-so-visible ways.

Mr. Berman received some of the best end-of-life care among PA decedents that I observed during my fieldwork. And yet I find it strange, even though I constructed the foregoing argument, to characterize Mr. Berman as an ideal case – to think of him as lucky. Though the State had awarded Mr. Berman the maximum award of in-home care, being in his home was extraordinarily sad. All the signs plastered up on his wall, warning the nurses to make sure "he is fully cleaned after a BM" and to "report all falls and seizures," were there to ensure he remained safe and healthy, but they also indicated how bleak the end of his life had been. Why, then, do I consider Mr. Berman's a type of success story? I think it is because, despite being relatively isolated, he received care in his declining years – and so he was isolated and severely incapacitated, but not neglected.

Dane's grandfather, who suffered many of the same indignities of old age was a similar case. Although not as incapacitated as Mr. Berman – at least not yet – he had his family to take care of him, as much as it stressed them to do so.



I recount Mr. Berman's case here because it seems a "classic" case of the declining elderly who are unable to care for themselves. Mr. Berman's case was a kind of archetype, just what I expected to encounter when I began my fieldwork asking, among other questions: how do people die alone? But other decedents and deaths I observed were not so "typical"; the group was demographically diverse and experienced far different levels of care.

PA decedents tended to be alone when they died; most lived alone and passed away with no one else present. However, not all were isolated as I had hypothesized at the beginning of my fieldwork. Every case was unique, and while many PA decedents suffered from different levels of isolation and lack of care, others had robust communities around them, and, because they chose not to raise a family or had outlived family members, their estates ended up at the PA's office. *For those who died isolated and alone, what did their final days look like? Did they receive care during this time? What could the PA's ethnographic narrative-making reveal about the answer to these questions?*

Putting Narratives Together

How did we piece together a decedent's final days? I am referring to two senses of "we" – the first including me and my PA colleagues as PA workers, and the second including me as an anthropologist.

As the PA, my colleagues and I observed and gathered stories from neighbors, family, friends, and acquaintances; the intimate, material details of the home; and the financial assets and debts held by or owed to institutions. Field investigations focused on the first two types of information gathering, while the third was investigated, collected, and addressed primarily from the office in the ensuing estate work.

After talking with Patrick and Dane outside of Mr. Berman's apartment, we searched his home for clues to his narrative. We looked for certain kinds of things, which could potentially be in any corner of his home: bank statements and other mail that told us about his assets; valuables he might keep hidden in his apartment; identifying

documents, like social security cards, passports, and driver's licenses; any information about remaining family; and, finally, a will. There were some places in the home where these things were more and less likely to be found. Mail was often near the front door, or in an office, if there was one. We also checked his mailbox. Information about family could potentially be in the bedroom. Usually, kitchens and bathrooms did not hold much important information, but we searched them anyway.

Though our official investigatory focus was limited – for example, we were not interested in decedents' hobbies or sexual lives – our thorough searches of homes revealed all of these material intimacies, whether relevant to the investigation or not. We learned, for instance, what soccer teams they supported; what books they read; what music they listened to; and what pornography they preferred. While the PA's job focused on constructing certain kinds of formal estate narratives that would be legally and bureaucratically useful, its investigatory practices yielded a fuller and much more intimate informal narrative of decedents' last days.

As a temporary PA employee, I participated in the informal and the formal making of decedent narratives. I collected physical materials, information, and stories during the investigations and follow-up estate work. I exchanged decedent stories with my coworkers in the office and out in the field. At the same time, I also collected information as an ethnographer, which I used to build an ethnographic understanding and narrative. After conducting research for the day, I would write fieldnotes about the decedents whose cases I worked on, in addition to accounts of and reflections on my other daily experiences. While I collected basic demographic information on most decedents, I also recorded much of what struck me as interesting, unusual, or memorable,

including my interactions with coworkers. These notes were, of course, affected by what my colleagues thought was interesting – but because of my different disciplinary training, I noticed some different details. I do not want to say that my perspective was more expansive than theirs, but only that it was, by necessity, focused on other things. I also had more time to look at the PA's office as a "field site" than the PA had to look at single decedents' estate as "field sites" – this is why the PA's ethnography is "thin" and mine is, if not "thick," then *thicker*. And the differences in disciplinary training that I and my colleagues received was not the only thing that determined what each of us found interesting. Our personal histories and interests, in addition to our changing moods, affected what we cared about, focused on, remembered, and wrote down.

The evidence the PA collected gave me and my colleagues both an incomplete and intensely intimate picture of a decedents' last days. This combination of the incomplete and intimate characterized our narratives. Decedents' narratives were especially incomplete because they usually lived and died alone, and so much of what happened during that time had disappeared with them. In addition, there was rarely anyone close enough to the decedent to know much about their last days. Finally, because new estates came into the office on a daily basis, there was not enough time or professional incentive to dig for extra information. We confidently put together these incomplete and intimate narratives, and treated them, particularly in their formal legal context, as complete.

As an unpaid, temporary employee and an anthropologist, however, I had the luxury of digging deeper when I wanted, making things "thicker"; my colleagues did not. In the office, I was asked to do certain jobs, but much of the work I did I had volunteered

to do, and I could take my time, go off on tangents, leave the office for a few days when I wanted to. I could linger in the file room and read everything there was to know about a decedent – which my colleagues did only if their job required it. I, on the other hand, could spend hours in the office satisfying my own curiosity. In the end, I did this far less often than I initially expected, at least until the very end of my fieldwork. A single case would only hold my attention for a certain period of time because more interesting cases kept coming into the office. I wanted to help out with the work, and I wanted to hear the latest stories. So even though, unlike my colleagues, I was not professionally obligated to keep moving on, it naturally happened in the course of my PA research, albeit at a slightly slower and more irregular pace.

My interests as an ethnographer and the pace of my research both mirrored and distorted the interests and pace of my colleagues. By this I mean that, because I was working with my colleagues almost daily, what I found interesting and the way that I moved through the work came to naturally mimic their style. Particularly towards the end of my research, however, when I spent more time outside of the office, I lingered longer on certain estates because I was not constantly bombarded with new ones.

Mr. Evans

When I accompanied the team on the William Evans investigation, I was far less experienced than I had been on the Mr. Berman investigation. I had only been on a few shorter decedent investigations including the case of an elderly Polish woman who have lived in a building in the Greenpoint neighborhood. Her home was tidy and small and full of Catholic paraphernalia: crosses, rosaries, and framed portraits of Pope John Paul II.

She had a few thousand dollars in a small savings account at a local credit union. There were no real valuables in the home, just her neatly folded clothes, a few crocheted blankets, and some old pieces of furniture. The investigation was over in twenty minutes. We released the apartment to the building's landlord, and we did not talk about the case afterwards.

Mr. Evans' investigation, on the other hand, was an *event.* Because some decedents had more assets and more family, their narratives were so much more significant, so much fuller. The elderly Polish woman had a small narrative, and her estate would not linger in our minds, it would not be a subject of conversation in the office. Some lives and deaths were easily forgotten because they had few assets, no family, and small, uncomplicated living spaces.

Mr. Evans, a white American in his early 70s, died in an assisted care facility, where he lived briefly before he passed. Before he was transferred to the facility, he had lived in a loft apartment in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Red Hook. Pablo showed me Mr. Evans' driver's license; he was a quirky-looking older man with a messy goatee and glasses.

Pablo recommended I come along on the investigation; he said the apartment was going to be cluttered and interesting. The administrator of the assisted care facility where Mr. Evans died told Pablo that he was rumored to be a millionaire. Maybe, Pablo suggested, Mr. Evans hid cash around his home. Pablo told me that once, during an investigation, he found thousands of dollars hidden under a flowerpot. The eccentric rich did things like this, Pablo said. To me this experience sounded, in a morbid way, like the realization of a childhood fantasy: freely exploring an abandoned home and finding

hidden treasures in unusual places. Pablo was excited to visit the house – he loved large, unusual homes – and wanted to share his excitement with me.

It was a perfect summer day. We left the PA's over-air conditioned, dingy basement office early in the morning and did not return until 5:00 PM. There was little traffic on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. I was new to the office, and Pablo and his assistant Anthony were kind and generous to me with their time.

The three of us arrived early and went for a walk. The local housing projects, the Red Hook Houses, were only two blocks away from Mr. Evans' pricey loft home in a converted factory building. Anthony, who accompanied Pablo during my first stint of fieldwork, had lived in the Red Hook Houses. He pointed to the NYPD flood lights set up around the buildings.

"You see those? You see all the police cars? That means there's a lot of crime here. There used to be shootings all the time. It was rough." Some of the PA employees lived in the same borough where we worked; even for those who didn't, most were native to New York City or had called it their adopted home for many years. They, and I, had personal connections to and stories about some of the places we went to and the kinds of people that we met in the field. These personal connections shaped our investigatory experiences, including the kinds of questions we asked and the narratives we constructed.

We continued walking and found a charming, narrow street, where I took photos. It was getting hot so we stopped into a deli for a cold drink. Anthony played the pick-four lottery. Pablo explained that Anthony liked to play the address of that day's investigation for good luck. Like the sports radio that Ralph always played in the car, or the regular

trips we took to Wendy's for lunch, our workdays were punctuated by rituals, in the office or out in the field.

We waited for Rodrigo, the building's superintendent, in the air-conditioned lobby of Mr. Evans' building. Several residents walked past the three of us – strangers dressed in the ratty clothes we wore when investigating – with confused looks. Rodrigo arrived and led us from the lobby to the building's industrial freight elevator. He told us that he lived rent-free in a small unit on the first floor with his family but had not been paid his salary for six months. Pablo told him to report his boss to the Department of Labor. He would find him the phone number before we left. Rodrigo looked at us, sincerely grateful, and said, "Thank you. God bless you."

The building was owned, we learned, by a pair of Hasidic real estate investors. Rodrigo, a Latin American immigrant, did not speak fluent English, and may have had difficulty communicating with his bosses. It seemed to us that he may have lacked the power and knowhow to avoid exploitation by his employers. I learned, during my two years of fieldwork, that Hasidic and other Orthodox Jewish real estate investors wielded significant power in the borough. They frequently showed up in large numbers at PA real estate auctions, single investors buying several million-dollar properties at a time. Some of these investors preyed on aging landlords in need of quick cash, in particular, I noticed, on elderly African Americans, who frequently owned brownstones in gentrifying neighborhoods like Bedford Stuyvesant. Other large investors mistreated their tenants and staff. This was not a rule across the demographic, but a pattern that emerged for the first time for me on that investigation and continued during my fieldwork.

Mr. Evans had lived on the fourth floor, across from two young men who moved into the building a year earlier. We talked to these men briefly, in their airy, high-ceilinged, one-room loft apartment. Pablo asked if they knew anything about their neighbor across the hall. Not really, they said, but it was hard living across from him because his apartment smelled. Other tenants had complained to building management, they added. It was so bad, in fact, that not long ago the police had to break open his door.

Rodrigo told us the rest of the story. He was not as talkative as Patrick, and the building was not as lively that morning as Mr. Berman's, but we had quickly established a good rapport and he talked to us openly. Rodrigo said that many people in the building had complained about the smell and the mice and roaches running in and out of Mr. Evans' apartment. A few months earlier, Rodrigo checked in on Mr. Evans when the smell had become really unbearable. Like Patrick, Rodrigo banged on Mr. Evans' front door but received no answer. He did not have keys to the apartments, so he called building management, who called the police, who finally forced the door open later that day. Mr. Evans was sitting inside, completely oblivious to what was happening around him. The apartment was full of garbage and they could see that he had been relieving himself on the floor.

The apartment was clearly a health hazard to the other tenants. Building management hired a cleaning service. Not long after, Mr. Evans was sent to the assisted care facility where he lived out his final days. The apartment was legally Mr. Evans' final permanent residence, and so it would tell us, through material clues, what Mr. Evans' life had been like *before* the very final weeks of his life. For the decedents who were moved to temporary facilities before they died, this final period, once they were moved out of

their permanent homes, was a kind of blind spot for the PA. Investigators like Pablo would speak to managers at these temporary facilities in order to pick up decedents' keys, usually learning a little bit about the decedent (like, in Mr. Evans' case, the rumor that he had been very rich), but decedents brought few or no personal belongings to these places. These temporary facilities really were, by their nature and legal status as non-permanent residences, a liminal space between life and death. This is why the facility where Mr. Evans passed away played a minimal part in the PA's work of constructing his narrative: it did not "count" as part of his real life narrative; he had not chosen to live there, and so it could not define him.

Pablo, Anthony, and I waited for Rodrigo to pry open Mr. Evans' door, which had been closed with a hanging padlock. Inside the apartment, nearly every surface was covered with stuff: books, papers, CDs, and DVDs. All the waste and rotting food had already been removed, so we were left with a stuffy and messy, but not unbearable, space. Anthony walked over to the loft's big windows and pushed them open. Rodrigo left, promising to check on us later.

Mr. Evans' apartment, like his neighbors', was one large room. Upon entering, there was a simple kitchen on the left and an entrance to the bathroom on the right. The apartment then continued into a large, open, light-filled space. Midway through Mr. Evans' space, facing the door, there was a staircase up to a wide lofted area.

Pablo and Anthony began searching in opposite corners of the apartment. I rummaged through the tall pile of mail, books, and CDs on his kitchen table. Mr. Evans had an impressive book collection that demonstrated a wide interest in literature, philosophy, music, film, and visual art. I slowly leafed through some art books. Looking

up, I noticed that Pablo and Anthony were rapidly making progress. I was new to the work and still lingered over items that I found interesting, which slowed everyone down. I forced myself to work faster, mimicking my colleagues.

Digging underneath the art books, I began finding years' worth of bank statements, mixed into piles of old mail. I opened these one by one to discover that Mr. Evans was indeed a wealthy man. He had $500 thousand dollars in one bank account; over $200 thousand in another; and $15 million in a third. I yelled this information over to Pablo and Anthony in the other corner of the apartment, who whooped with excitement. "I knew it!" Pablo said. They instructed me to keep looking through *everything*: "Don't worry about being careful, and don't put things back where you found them," Pablo said. "Otherwise you won't know what you looked through, and that will slow you down." This, I learned, was one of the cardinal rules of investigation, but one that often disturbed loved ones when they were present.

Scattered around the apartment, the three of us found thick stacks of US Savings Bonds in $1000 and $500-dollar denominations. We continued digging, and, following Pablo and Anthony, I began throwing aside what I searched through. All around us, we discovered uncashed checks. These checks were made out to William Evans from the estate of a Samuel Evans. Samuel, we guessed, was William's father. The checks seemed to come monthly for years, and none of them were cashed. The three of us speculated out loud: what kind of rift did this signal between father and son? And what impact would this have on Mr. Evans' estate?

Pablo, Anthony, and I each counted up the savings bonds to ensure we had the right number. The bonds, bank statements, and all the checks we could find went into the property bag.

I set to work opening all of the packages by the front door, from stores like J.Crew, L.L. Bean, and Sur La Table. Mr. Evans bought many oxford shirts, khaki pants, and fancy umbrellas —still in their original packaging, unopened, and several of the same items. He bought fancy cooking appliances, which seemed strange, judging from the state of his kitchen. I would never know for sure why Mr. Evans bought these things or why they were never opened; these details had died with him. His confusing collection of unopened packages portended the frequent hoarding that I would eventually notice among the PA's decedents.

I went up to the lofted area, which we had not yet searched. It was dusty and full of books. I sat cross legged on the floor, flipping through books as Pablo and Anthony finished downstairs. It had[been hours already and the apartment was hot. The three of us were eager to leave soon, go outside, and breathe the fresh air.

I called down to the guys and asked them what would happen to the books. Would we sell the valuable ones?

"No," Pablo responded. "We tried to sell book collections before. It's too much of a hassle. Whatever we spend delivering them to a bookstore is always the same or less than they're willing pay us."

"So what will happen to the books then?" I asked.

Pablo shrugged. "When we release the apartment to the landlord, he can do whatever he wants with them! He'll probably just throw everything out so he can rent out

the apartment." New to the process of investigation, I learned which items in decedents' homes did and did not matter to the PA. Pablo and Anthony noticed that Mr. Evans had a lot of books scattered around everywhere, and though this fact was certainly part of their own informal narratives, the actual content of the books had only mattered to me. The books, because they were valueless, would certainly not make it into the investigation report.

We found Rodrigo working down the hall and told him we were nearly ready to go. "Can I clean out the apartment now?" he asked. "Not yet," Anthony said. We needed more time to follow up on our findings. Pablo and Anthony wanted to contact the lawyer who, according to the uncashed checks, represented Samuel Evans' estate. If there was a family estate lawyer, William Evans could have a will. If that was the case, the PA needed to get out of his estate as quickly and with as little interference as possible, allowing the will to go through probate. Though the building's management company could not clean and rent out the apartment yet, they would continue receiving monthly rent payments from the PA's office out of Mr. Evans' estate account for as long as the apartment remained sealed.

Until Mr. Evans, I had always left the full-blown searching to my colleagues, because I was nervous in the field. Usually, two people at a time went out on investigations and I felt like a third wheel. But in Mr. Evans' case, there was so much stuff in his home that, for the first time, I felt that I was really needed. And Pablo's enthusiasm was infectious; the investigation was a social process of discovery. I was introduced to certain practices that I kept with me through the rest of my fieldwork: while searching, not putting things back where I found them; collectively celebrating

investigatory breakthroughs; putting aside certain pieces of mail and not others. I also learned from Pablo and Anthony's comportment in the field – how their friendliness put people at ease, and how they periodically reminded people of their authority as PA representatives. I began to learn what was valuable, according to the PA, and what was not.

Rodrigo suggested that we talk to another building tenant named Manny, who lived down the hall from Mr. Evans. They were good friends, he said.

We returned to the apartment, discarded our hygienic masks and plastic gloves, and threw them onto the floor. The four of us filed out and locked up. Pablo pasted a big sticker on the spot where the door meets the frame, sealing the apartment's entrance. This was the PA's standard white sticker, which forbade anyone else from entering – even the landlord (although whether landlords actually obeyed this rule we would never know).

Down the hall, Manny answered the door in his bathrobe, his apartment completely dark except for the bluish glow of an aquarium directly behind him. He told us that he and Mr. Evans had been friends for a long time. They were neighbors in Manhattan, and Manny followed Mr. Evans when he moved to the Red Hook building years earlier. As time went on, Mr. Evans became ill and it was increasingly difficult to communicate with him. In the last few months of his life, Mr. Evans was doing so badly that he could not even respond when Manny tried to speak with him.

No one we spoke to during that day told us what, exactly, had been wrong with Mr. Evans. He died in his early 70s. During the investigation, and in coming weeks over the phone with his other acquaintances, Pablo, Anthony, and I listened to and cobbled together various stories about Mr. Evans' disturbing symptoms. People we encountered in

the field and in the ensuing office case work often told us stories about the crises produced by decedents' failing health. Specific medical diagnoses were rare. For the people whose lives intersected with decedents', these anecdotes about illness were what they remembered and what mattered.

During my research, I came to associate death with a myriad of stories and complications that could be thrown together to create a larger, but always incomplete, picture. Death certificates could tell us the medical cause of death, but they were rarely useful; they never told us much about the shape and size of a decedents' life. Even for PA's formal estate narratives, which accounted for decedents' assets and distributees, these stories were what really mattered. They told us, anecdotally, what decedents owned, what money they had, whether there might be a will, whether there was any distant family or long-lost children, and whether there was any family property. Through collecting these stories, the PA approximated, collaged pieces together, and strung together disparate notes to piece together narratives, both formal and informal.

Manny told us that everyone in Mr. Evans' family had died. Mr. Evans had a troubled relationship with his only sister, who predeceased him. Neither of them had children. They had grown up in Manhattan, where their father first owned a grocery store in Midtown and later went into the real estate business. The family was wealthy and Manny knew that Mr. Evans and his sister had fought over their sizeable inheritance. He could not remember the details, but he remembered that there had been lawyers involved and that the siblings did not speak for years.

Manny had no idea if the family still owned buildings in Manhattan. Maybe they were sold after their father's death, I suggested, since the siblings could not cooperate. We'll look into it, Anthony said.

Manny asked us if he had missed his friend's funeral. "He hasn't been buried yet," Pablo said. Mr. Evans' body was still in the morgue. He did not have a pre-need – a pre-arranged and prepaid burial plan – and no one had claimed his body. Mr. Evans would be buried soon by one of the PA's contracted funeral homes. He would receive the PA's standard, no-frills burial, which usually cost about two thousand dollars. We could call Manny when the burial arrangements were finalized. "I would like that," he said. Pablo told Manny that the burial would probably take place out in New Jersey or Pennsylvania, where the funeral home typically laid PA bodies to rest. Plots were cheaper and more plentiful out there.

For me, one of the saddest aspects of Mr. Evans' investigation was knowing that his body had not been claimed and buried. His case was a referral from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME), who would reach out to the PA's office when bodies had not been claimed for over a month. Since Mr. Evans had money, he would not be buried in City Cemetery on Hart Island, which was reserved for those who could not afford burials. Nevertheless, he would receive a humble and lonely burial. This situation contradicted the truism that only poorer New Yorkers died alone and intestate: Mr. Evans was, after all, a multi-millionaire.

We thanked Manny for his time and walked down to the freight elevator, speculating together about Mr. Evans, the Manhattan property, the uncashed checks, and

his late father's estate lawyer. We had collected some promising leads. "I told you this would be a good one," Pablo said to me.

As I learned how formal narratives were shaped in the field, I also learned how informal narratives emerged organically through the work we were sent there to do. Many of our experiences during the Evans investigation, and the many aspects of the decedent's personality that emerged through his material possessions – his quirkiness, his interest in music, literature, and the arts, his confusing hoarding instincts – would not find a place in the official investigation report but we would remember them ourselves, exchanging stories in the office, or recalling them many months later. Sometimes my colleagues would be asked to call upon these informal narratives when estates entered different phases of administration, particularly during real estate sales or the asset distribution stage. I, on the other hand, wrote down my own informal narrative in my fieldnotes, that same night or later that week. Then I would turn this story into an ethnographic vignette, which changed as I considered it over and over again.

Though the investigation report would mention that Rodrigo gave us access to the apartment, it would not say anything about Rodrigo's strained relationship with his employers – something that Pablo, Anthony, and I would come to associate with this investigation. Though the report would list all the things that we recovered from the apartment – bank statements, IDs, uncashed checks, US savings bonds, and cash – it would not include the other items we found that were not deemed valuable. I would not forget the packages that I opened, full of brand-new clothing and kitchen equipment, their presence a puzzle. Pablo, Anthony, and I would remember the books, CDs, and DVDs scattered across the floor. We would remember the spectacular large lofted windows in

the apartment, and Mr. Evans' few pieces of furniture. Though the report would mention a friend named Manny, and a few of the details he told us about Mr. Evans, it would not include many other aspects of our conversation: that Manny had moved to Red Hook on Mr. Evans' recommendation; that Mr. Evans became impossible to communicate with in his final days; that Manny wanted to attend Mr. Evans' funeral; and so on. All of this would remain, however, in our own informal narratives.

Another aspect of the investigation was the attitude that characterized the work. Specifically, the desire for discovery and to fit clues together – in other words, the desire to "solve" a mystery – motivated us as we searched Mr. Evans' apartment. This desire is a key aspect of how a decedent's final days are put together. It was where Pablo got his enthusiasm for his work; it was why I was excited to investigate the apartment. The anecdote that Pablo shared with me before going out to the field was about "discovering thousands of dollars hidden under a flowerpot." Though we were investigating something serious – a death – the search, because it promised "discoveries," was also fun and exciting. Discovering hidden millions, which we found in Mr. Evans' case, also had real consequences for the estate. Uncovering Mr. Evans' family dramas – a rich father, an estranged sister – also affected the legal future of the estate. So while the desire for discovery of assets and family secrets could be exciting and fun, it was, at the same time, an essential part of putting together the formal estate narratives. Narrative is predicated on the social. There is emotion, feeling, and investment in the contours of a life narrative.

The ethnographic data collected by the PA in the process of constructing decedent narratives can be used to better understand the final days of people who die alone. The process of constructing decedent narratives in the field consists of three types of data

gathering. The first includes stories collected from people the PA encounters in the field. Second, residential spaces and material possessions are surveyed with an eye towards their material value and what they might reveal about family connections. Third, certain material possessions like bank statements and checks are collected because they contain direct information about family and financial assets. The work of constructing narratives is social, ritualistic, and includes a variety of practices that have been developed over time. I learned these practices in the field during my early investigations, including Mr. Evans' investigation. The narratives constructed by the PA are both formal and informal; they are also, at the same time, intimate and always incomplete.

The similarities and differences between Mr. Berman and Mr. Evans' cases told us something about how people who died alone lived out their final days. Both were older men unable to care of themselves. Mr. Evans, however, was younger than Mr. Berman, whose bad health and mental degeneration could be associated more readily with his advanced age. In his early 70s, Mr. Evans suffered from something more unusual, perhaps Alzheimer's disease combined with other conditions. While Mr. Berman's seemed a classic case of the incapacitated elderly, entirely dependent on healthcare workers, Mr. Evans' case was different at least in part because of his younger age and his lack of healthcare until well after his decline.

Mr. Berman received at-home care for years before his death; Mr. Evans was sent to an assisted living facility and died shortly after. Why, when neither had living family, and Mr. Evans had far greater financial resources, did Mr. Berman receive better care, and sooner? Both men lived in apartment buildings, but Mr. Berman had been in his apartment for 40 years. He was a known character in his building, and his building had a

strong sense of community. Mr. Evans had only recently moved to a new building in a new neighborhood. As I learned from Anthony, remnants of the old neighborhood – the Red Hook Houses – remained, while warehouse buildings like Mr. Evans' were being converted into luxury apartments for richer New Yorkers. Mr. Evans was part of a recent change in the neighborhood and his building was new. There had been little time to build a sense of community amongst neighbors, as there had been in Mr. Berman's building. As the building's longest tenant, Mr. Berman had outlived the community that he first moved into; he was the sole Jewish New Yorker in a now majority Latino and African American building (and therefore other residents used "the Jewish guy" to identify him). But the community that replaced the previous tenants, had, by the time of Mr. Berman's advanced age, obviously lived there for some time.

This sense of community, or lack of community, in Mr. Evans' case – neighborhood-wide and in the building – could be attributed not only to the history of each area, but also to the role of the superintendent in each building. During both investigations, as with many others, the supers were our primary interlocutors. They were usually the people who gave us access to the apartments we had to search, and they often had stories about decedents. For those who lived alone and never had visitors, these supers were sometimes their only point of contact with the outside world. Interestingly, in both of these cases, the supers had similar encounters with the decedents, both of which led, eventually, to each decedent receiving care for his devastating health condition.

It was clear from our conversations with the two supers that they worked under different conditions, and that these conditions affected what kind of care the two decedents received. Both supers lived in the building with their families. Rodrigo,

however, was a recent immigrant and could not communicate fluently in English. Patrick was a native English speaker and easily communicated with everyone. Patrick had a good relationship with building management – Dane, who represented the management company, talked very openly with Patrick during his visit. Rodrigo's bosses had failed to pay him his salary for six months. He had so much difficulty communicating with building management that he turned to us – strangers – for advice. Patrick had keys to the tenants' apartments; Rodrigo did not. We saw Patrick talk to a number of the building tenants in a warm, friendly way. Rodrigo, though he seemed to have a completely fine relationship with the tenants, was not close with either Manny or Mr. Evans' neighbors across the hall.

Mr. Berman had received earlier and better care because Patrick had the relationships and local knowhow to negotiate Mr. Berman's situation with management, neighbors, and municipal officials. Rodrigo did not have those kinds of relationships, apparently not through any fault of his own, but because of the particular situation in which he had found himself: unreceptive and exploitative management, a brand-new building, language difficulties, and a lack of local knowledge developed over time. These single people – superintendents – because of their unique position taking care of buildings and their tenants, as service people with extraordinary access to people's homes, could affect the end-of-life of the isolated. The PA's process of narrative-making revealed ways in which superintendents had affected the final days of these individuals.

Mr. Berman's health crisis had been visibly more urgent than Mr. Evans', and this had affected his access to care. When Rodrigo and the police department forced their way into Mr. Evans' apartment, he was suffering from a health crisis that was also visible in

some ways (the smell in the hallway, the vermin running out of his apartment), but not as urgent. A fire, like Mr. Berman's, had to be put out immediately or the whole building might go up in flames. Others could be injured or killed. A bad smell was bothersome but tolerable, because it was not life-threatening to others. So though Mr. Evans' apartment – full of garbage and excrement – was, at the time of his crisis, in worse shape than Mr. Berman's, Mr. Evans only received care once the situation had escalated considerably. Rodrigo told us that he intervened only when complaints from the neighbors could no longer be ignored. In a way, then, the fire that Mr. Berman started had been a stroke of luck – an urgent cry for help that had to be addressed. Mr. Evans' problem, on the other hand, had been slow burning, making itself seen (and smelled) in more subtle ways that could be tolerated and ignored.

The PA's work reveals how certain forms of suffering become visible to others, and how this visibility determines who receives and does not receive care. Because the PA collects stories from people like Patrick and Rodrigo *and* has access to the intimate details of decedents' homes, its ethnographic narratives show decedents' public *and* private struggles. Though incomplete, these narratives reveal what behaviors "register" with other individuals and with the State, and what behaviors remain private until the PA's intimate postmortem intervention. In other words, the PA's work of narrative making, a form of "thin" ethnography, reveals the interplay between visible and invisible life in the city, and how visible and invisible life affect the kind of care that people receive from other individuals and from the State.

Mr. Evans had one social connection that Mr. Berman did not have: Manny, his friend in the building. In the end, however, this connection did not slow Mr. Evans' rapid

decline. Manny told us that it was increasingly difficult to communicate with Mr. Evans in the final period of his life and that it had become impossible near the very end. Perhaps it was too difficult for Manny to seek the kind of caretaking work that his friend needed. Maybe Mr. Evans had been combative and resisted help. Maybe Manny had issues of his own, or maybe he thought that his friend had a robust family network. Reflecting on this investigation, I can only speculate, trying to fill the holes in Manny's stories. The investigation did reveal, however, that having friends close by did not guarantee care. Providing care to the seriously ill and incapacitated was a major undertaking, even for close family members, who had the greatest incentive to provide care: family obligation and the promise of inheritance. Why expect friends to provide such care? And in the absence of family and willing friends or acquaintances, essentially all that was left – apart from some religious-based charity organizations – was the State. Sometimes, ailing New Yorkers fared better with the State – if the State was even contacted – and sometimes they did not.

Coda

Because PA workers collect stories from people who knew the decedent *and* examine the material intimacies of decedents' homes, the PA's work is particularly good at revealing the visible *and* invisible ways that people who die alone live out their final days. In Mr. Berman's case, conversations with a building superintendent revealed how the elderly man was able to receive 24-hour care in his home. And a search of Mr. Evans' home revealed that he was a multimillionaire, but that neither his considerable wealth nor having a close friend living nearby guaranteed sufficient care in his final days. Other PA

decedents, such as 60-year-old Patricia, had robust social networks but refused all offers of help upon her cancer diagnosis. 80-year-old Ted also had close friends on his block but refused all help when it came to his health and to his private home.

Many details of the PA's investigations filter into the informal narratives of my coworkers and into the formal, written narratives that directly affect the legal journey of these decedents' estates. However, it is through my own intervention as an anthropologist that these ethnographic details are examined further. Therefore, the work presented in this chapter is a combination of the ethnographic narrative-making techniques of the PA and my own analytic impulses as an anthropologist of the PA.

Chapter 3 | Destruction and Hoarding

Material objects of market value help the Public Administrator construct decedent narratives and, ultimately, to write their Final Accounting. In the PA's formal narratives, the more valuable stuff a decedent has, the more there is to say. And this tends to be true, also, of the PA's informal narratives, because everything the PA does in the field is shaped by the office's mandate to collect as many assets as possible for each estate. According to the PA, therefore, the more possessions of market value owned by a decedent, the greater legacy they leave, the more substantial the life they lived. Decedent narratives are, therefore, not only *material,* but depend on market value. In the hands of the PA, each decedent disappears while their valuable possessions take their place. If there are no valuable possessions to take their place, then nothing – no legacy – is left.

Part 1: Destruction

Mary Roland

A fire – probably started by the squatters – destroyed much of the property at 125 Bedford Avenue. Those squatters and the fire changed nearly everything about Mary Roland and her estate.

I visited the property only after the fire. The burned facade of the house faced a wide avenue in Brooklyn. The windows were blown out and shattered glass covered the front yard. I made my way through the open gate and up the stoop, stepping around the broken glass. A basketball and a pair of white sneakers sat in the doorway.

The PA investigators, however, had first visited 125 Bedford a year earlier. The police had already been in the home, responding to a call from Ms. Roland's neighbor

Johnny who had been trying to contact her for two weeks. After the Medical Examiner came to remove her body and transport it to the morgue, the police placed a seal on Ms. Roland's front door.

Mary Roland had been a retired schoolteacher, never married, and had no children. She lived alone in the spacious one-family house. Her mother Florence had passed away twenty-five years earlier. Her sister, who predeceased their mother, had also been unmarried and childless. Johnny could not remember the sister's name.

The arrangement of stuff in Mary Roland's home would be used to construct a narrative: a straightforward story about an elderly woman with no close relations and few social connections, who lived alone in a valuable house in a gentrifying neighborhood. The house was full of valuable art and furniture from a certain era and cultural milieu. The art and furniture would be sold and the profits deposited in Ms. Roland's estate account.

Investigators from the PA's office came soon after the police and Medical Examiner left. They gathered the standard information about Ms. Roland: her financial and real estate assets, her debts, her family and social connections, and her insurance policies. Her house was especially valuable because it was a standalone one-family building – not a row house, like many others in the neighborhood. Some decedent homes were straight-ahead "clean-outs," and the PA paid the lowest bidder to clean out the home and keep whatever they wanted. Ms. Roland's house, however, would go to the highest bidder, whoever was willing to pay the highest price for the stuff inside her home. After the initial investigation but before the house went up for auction, the PA would bring the antiques dealers to 125 Bedford to walk through the house and place bids.

And then, sometime between the first investigation and the antiques dealer visit – no one knows exactly when – a group of squatters moved in. They tagged the inside with graffiti and destroyed many of Ms. Roland's belongings.

Mary Roland's possessions were particularly important to her estate narrative because in life she had been isolated. Therefore, in the absence of social connections, her belongings defined her more than the stories that people told. There were so few stories – Johnny was her only close friend – but there was a big house full of stuff. For the PA's purposes, that stuff would define her. The destruction of Ms. Roland's property, therefore, was the destruction of her narrative.

What happens when property is destroyed?

If material property is used to construct a coherent narrative about a decedent, then what happens when that property is destroyed? As Mary Roland's case demonstrates, a decedent's seemingly stable narrative can easily be shattered by contingent circumstances.

As discussed in chapter two, the complete, stable, coherent narrative is a necessary fiction of the estate administration process. Decedent narratives are always, in reality, incomplete, but they need to appear complete on paper and in court. If they do not appear complete, coherent, and stable, then the Public Administrator's Office is not doing its job properly. If the PA were to put a decedent to rest with missing or confusing information, the office would be seen as, at best, as incompetent, and, at worst, as corrupt. The PA's formal narratives, in the form of written reports, legal papers, and court

appearances, need to appear complete because they have to be legible to a legal and bureaucratic logic.

However the goal of narrating these decedent's lives and legacies, as much as it might appear so, is not to represent them comprehensively as people. The PA does not have the time, resources, or the need to do something like this. The law does not ask for a comprehensive life story in order to lay a decedent to rest, but it asks for the appearance of coherency and completeness. Because material property is used to construct a decedent's narrative, the PA's work becomes an exercise in making the decedent's relationship to their things coherent. The PA must tell a coherent story about the decedent's relationship to their things in order to lay them to rest.

A decedent's possessions need to have market value

Decedent's formal narratives consist, above all, of their valuable possessions. The written documents produced by the PA during the process of estate administration has to do with the decedent's family connections and their valuable possessions. In the Final Accounting, the value of the decedent's estate is split according to the rules of intestate succession. That is, this final legal document accounts for everything valuable owned by the decedent, and distributes the final value of the estate amongst family. The estate's value is the sum of all the material and real property sold by the PA, in addition to bank and investment accounts. Therefore, to make it into a decedent's formal narrative, property must have market value.

The more things you have of market value, the more substantial your narrative will be. And the more substantial your narrative, then the more you will be remembered

by the State. In other words, the more valuable stuff you had, the more of a person you were – according to the PA. *Market value is linked directly to the storied life.*

And even though informal narratives, as discussed in the previous chapter, are far more capacious than formal ones and contain all manner of investigatory experience, the whole of that investigatory experience is shaped by the search for things of market value, because that is the PA's mandate. Notice, for instance, that many of the decedents discussed in this dissertation had significant assets. This is no coincidence. The PA spends far more time on larger estates; there is more stuff and therefore much more of a story to tell. If I were not an ethnographer of the PA, if I was simply chronicling the lives of New Yorkers who had recently died, then perhaps I would not focus so much on people who owned property. There would most certainly be ways of telling a life story that did not rely so much on the things that people owned. But, for the PA, this was how the narrative had to be built.

The material shape of the decedent's stuff matters. Estate administration is a legal process.

It is important, though perhaps a little awkward, to continue discussing "things of market value" or "valuable stuff" rather than only use the word "assets." But "assets" implies that all of a decedent's property should be treated as equivalent, as interchangeable. A decedent's property is not interchangeable, its form matters; material objects are varied in their materiality. Even though valuable things are eventually sold off – that is, "liquidated" – and the final accounting distributes money rather than things, these specific things matter.

Why do these material specifics matter when everything is sold off anyway? Doesn't liquidating everything mean that the state only cares about an estate's market value, and that the form of a decedent's possessions is ultimately irrelevant? Looking only at the "liquidation" endpoint, however, does not reflect estate administration as a process (Moore 1978, Yngvesson 1976). The form of things matters very much to that process. For instance, it matters what kind of house a decedent owned, and in what neighborhood. These facts shape investigatory experiences, decide who will bid on the property and how much the property will be worth. It matters if the decedents owned valuable jewelry, furniture, had regular bank accounts, or large investment accounts. These details determined the stories we exchanged with each other in the field and in the office, and they also changed the content and types of formal narratives that had to be produced during the estate administration process.

In this chapter, I tell two stories about the destruction of market value. In the first story, a group of squatters destroy the market value of Mary Roland's possessions. In the second story, a decedent named Howard Granoff hoarded so many things that, even though many of his possessions were in mint condition, their sheer quantity destroyed their value.

Mary Roland, continued

The PA's investigators found the squatters during their visit with the antiques dealers. They discovered upon entering that much of Ms. Roland's furniture and art – which was the reason the bidders had come to the house – had been destroyed. The

furniture was torn, thrown over, upside down, the cushions ripped; all the art was taken off the walls and stacked haphazardly on the ground.

The day they discovered the squatters, Quentin walked in first, ahead of the bidders, and found a young man in the back of the house. The young man started yelling at Quentin, Quentin yelled back, telling him to leave. Meanwhile, the bidders and other PA investigator, Hasan, standing in the lobby of the house, encountered three more people running down the stairs: two men apparently in their early twenties and a girl in her teens. They ran to join their friend in the back of the house. Quentin and the young man kept yelling at each other; the confrontation verged on violence. Eventually, the four squatters grabbed their stuff and ran out of the house. Quentin then called the local police precinct to report the incident.

The police showed up at the house soon after. Quentin explained what the PA was doing there, and that the property, which had once belonged to Ms. Roland, was being managed by the agency. The kids had trespassed on private property and had wrecked much of the furniture and art; they had even destroyed some of the house itself. For all these reasons, Quentin said, the squatters had committed a serious offense. The cops took notes.

Later that day, when I saw Quentin back in the office, he told me that the police did not care about the squatters. They told him that kids will be kids and there was no point in trying to round them up. Quentin seemed defeated. The day's trip had been wasted, he said. The bidders no longer had anything to bid on. And reporting the incident to the police had been pointless. The estate's assets were damaged, and their personal safety had been threatened.

Late that afternoon, everyone in the office gathered around Quentin to listen to more of the day's dramatic events. One person suggested that the investigators carry guns to protect themselves. Another person said that a wooden bat would suffice. All of us agreed it was surprising that this kind of thing did not happen in the field more frequently.

The specific consequences for Ms. Roland's narrative

What are the specific consequences when property, the backbone of a decedent's narrative, is destroyed? The value of Ms. Roland's estate was significantly diminished. There would no longer be any money made from auctioning off her belongings to the highest clean-out bidder; the bidders were no longer interested. At auction, her damaged house would likely sell for less. Finally, the PA would have to provide some explanation as to why these things were destroyed, exactly what had gone wrong. The incident with the squatters would have to be recorded, formally, somewhere, to ensure that the PA, as caretaker of Ms. Roland's estate, had not acted unethically, to safeguard against fraud or the appearance of fraud.

The process of investigation and case management was disturbed. Investigators and bidders were exposed to danger in the field. That day, only the investigators and bidders were supposed to go inside the house, which had been locked and sealed. That is what the PA's white sticker, pasted over the house's door jamb, supposedly indicated and guaranteed. But these simple legal guarantees had been undermined.

And Ms. Roland's simple narrative had to be amended. Her narrative would now consist of a shorter list of assets and an explanation as to why her previously significant

assets had been destroyed. This explanation would ensure (or attempt to ensure) that the PA would not be held culpable for the destruction of her assets. Her estate's narrative would no longer be stable – it would no longer appear to reflect an estate unchanged from the moment that she died.

Marco finds the fire

Marco worked for the Public Administrator as a property manager. This meant that he was an occasional super for PA-managed properties, putting salt on the curb before it snowed, responding to complaints about heat and electricity, and driving by to do brief inspections. A day after Quentin and Hasan found the squatters, Marco drove by 125 Bedford to survey the damage.

Marco discovered that, since the previous day's visit, a destructive fire had further damaged the house. The house as a whole did not burn down, but its facade was blackened and there was significant damage to the interior. "It looks pretty bad," Marco told Quentin over the phone. Quentin relayed the news to everyone in the office. We all said that the squatters must have started the fire. They probably wanted to get back at Quentin and the others somehow, to punish the authorities who kicked them out of their reclaimed space.

I visit the fire

Ms. Roland's four-story building, surrounded by two empty lots, rose from a tangle of bushes in the front yard. The vinyl siding was almost entirely burned off its facade, exposing, in patches, the charred brick underneath. The rest of the block stood

undamaged. It was early Friday afternoon when I visited Mary Roland's house, and families, Orthodox Jewish and Black, were strolling around the neighborhood.



The front door was already open. It was the day after Marco visited, two days after Quentin and Hasan encountered the squatters. As I went into the house, stepping over broken glass in the entrance, I noticed that the entire floor was covered with stuff: clothes, towels, bed sheets, books, newspapers, and mail. The walls, once white, had all been singed a light grey, patterned with white smears, handprints, and thin streams of water. The front hallway was lined with clothes, the stairway covered in papers, and the front parlor contained piles of books, sheets, overturned appliances, and furniture. A mattress leaned against the wall and wedged behind it was a long fur coat. A clock radio lay upside down next to some garbage bags. Behind the front parlor was a smaller room with another mattress and bed spring, and behind that was a large back room stuffed full of books, on shelves and in piles all over the floor: “A Field Guide to Birds”; “The Negro in the Abolitionist Movement.”



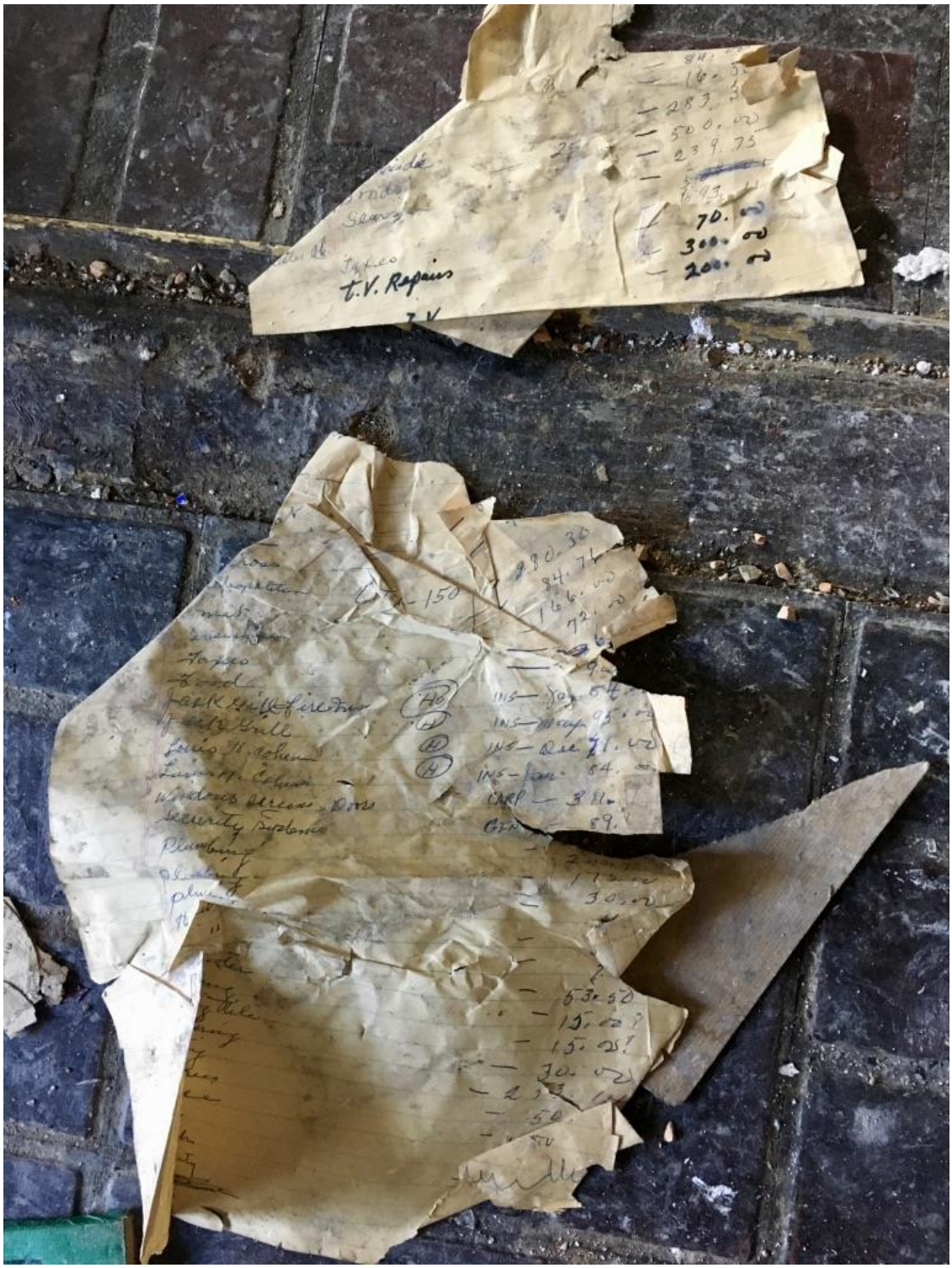
A baby grand piano sat in the corner of the same room, blocked by an overturned bedframe and a heavy metal window gate pulled out of its hinges. I climbed over the stacks of books, trying carefully not to trip and fall. I poked my head through the wide-open windows in the back of the room. They looked directly onto the fire escape landing, which was covered in interlacing fingers of broken glass, reflecting the bright blue sky.

I made my way up the debris-covered stairs to the second floor, worried that the structure of the house would suddenly give way under me. On the second floor landing I padded over a cushion of bedsheets, comforters, bags, and clothes. Some furniture still stood upright in the back room. A typewriter, a few frying pans, and a teapot sat on the shelves along one wall and a large wooden armoire in another corner. Hidden behind this room was a kitchen with a small stove and refrigerator. From the front room on the second floor you could see and hear the street: a baby crying, a car horn, a couple arguing. In the house, a small chandelier was still intact, hanging from a delicately ornate molding in the center of the ceiling.



I found some old Polaroids scattered on the floor. They looked like they had been taken in the house. In one photo, a middle-aged woman sat beside a decorative fireplace in a pretty white dress. In another, a bouquet of flowers stood atop a dining table.

And then I started to notice all the little notes, mail, and recipe cards everywhere on the floor. A recipe card for roasting turkey in the microwave. A long list of itemized expenses, written in elegant cursive. "T.V. Repairs – 300.00 … Plumbing - 200.00 … Louis H. Cohen - 71.00 … Windows, Screens, Doors - Carpenter - 311.00." Under my foot was a bank statement from HSBC. Pieces of a personal, daily life were scattered everywhere.


T.V. Repairs
70.
300.
200.
Sears
Windows Screens Doors
Security Systems
Plumbing

The third floor looked different. While the first and second floors were only partially destroyed, the third floor had been totally transformed, presumably by the squatters. The ceiling was partially torn out, exposing the insulation, and, in patches, the sky above. A mattress lay in the center of the third-floor bedroom, dramatically illuminated by the sunshine streaming in through the holes in the ceiling. A few framed prints of wildlife were propped up along the bottom of the wall. Next to these prints was a square wooden board painted graffiti-style with the words "The Writing On The Wall." The walls in the next room, facing the street, were covered in graffiti. The squatters spray painted a black smiley face in one corner of the room, ominously dripping paint from each eye. On the wall facing the street was the striking silhouette of a girl with long hair in a wide skirt, lifting her palm towards the ceiling. On the other wall, "O M F" was spray painted in large letters; next to it, the words "HavE Fun Later," and some loops and black scribbles.



I stood there for a while, taking pictures, left with a mixed sense of shock and wonder.

My visit after the fire, alone, was different from my visits with the PA. I went out of curiosity, not to investigate. I wanted to see what the destruction looked like. I had seen so many homes with the PA after decedents died, and I had approached them with my colleagues, together, searching in a particular way, looking for particular things, eliciting and appreciating the stories that neighbors and others told, and the stories told by the decedents' belongings and living spaces. So there was a lot to these standard visits with my PA colleagues –the informal narratives that we constructed together were expansive, contained a lot of stuff and stories that extended far beyond the narrower goals of the formal estate administration process. But during this visit to Ms. Roland's, I did not go in my capacity as a PA worker, but in my capacity as an ethnographer. This meant

I had the luxury of visiting this house in this condition on this afternoon with plenty of time to explore because I was not just a PA worker, I was also, primarily, an anthropologist with time and funding of my own. My coworkers at the PA's office had to work on other things this afternoon, they had to be in the office or out in the field on another case. But I could take off and spend time exploring the house and taking photos.

I was curious about how the destruction of Ms. Roland's house had transformed her stuff and changed the structure of her house. When I visited with the PA, we saw the decedent's stuff in a certain state, and after we did our searches, often throwing things aside while we searched, we transformed the house into a different kind of space. In Ms. Roland's case, after the squatters and the fire, the house was transformed from a coherent space into an incoherent space. I wanted to see what this looked like, in person.

When the PA visited, we threw things aside when searching, and someone who walked in after us, not knowing what had happened, would likely be confused about why certain things were in the wrong places, why documents were strewn all over the place. So sometimes spaces looked incoherent because the PA had interfered. But that wasn't the case this time.[11]

Things were not where they were supposed to be and how they were supposed to be. Beds were turned over, art thrown around the place and furniture damaged. The PA would never do this because the value of these items was destroyed. That is, the PA would not knowingly do anything to reduce the value of objects in the home and reduce the value of the home itself. It is the State's job is to protect and produce as much profit from decedents' assets as possible. So part of the reason that Ms. Roland's narrative was

[11] Though it is interesting that there is some similarity between evidence of destruction/squatting and evidence of the PA's visit.

incoherent according to the PA's logic is because no care was taken with valuable things. That is, the squatters seemed to destroy without prejudice. They had no regard for the value of objects, and this is precisely the opposite of the PA's directive, of the PA's logic.

Clothes are supposed to be put away and organized in drawers and closets. Instead, clothes were in piles everywhere on the ground, in the front parlor, in the hallways, on different floors in the house. In a house, the floor is supposed to be clear in order to walk from room to room, but it was covered with stuff. Papers that should have been stored in drawers, on tables, organized in files or at least in stacks, were scattered everywhere, indiscriminately: recipe cards, old housekeeping accounts, new mail, and old photographs. Garbage bags, also, sat haphazardly between household objects that were not trash. Art that should have been hanging on the walls or stored, safely, somewhere, was instead in messy piles, dirty, and torn.

The structure of the house was not the way it was supposed to be. The vinyl siding on the house was burned and falling off. The windows were blown out. There was shattered glass on the ground. The ceiling and the walls on the top floor were torn out in patches revealing the insulation that should remain inside the walls. There was graffiti inside the house.

What does it mean for a space to make sense? There is a certain logic that we expect from a house. As the PA, we conducted our investigations with a sense of where to find what – that is, after visiting many homes, we became practiced at finding the important documents, at knowing what things people tend to keep where. As the PA, we developed our own sense of home-logic. But besides what the PA did in particular, there is a general logic to a home space – that is, a home is a place where a person lives, where

they come back to rest. The home needs to be navigable (not stuff piled up everywhere), the home needs to be structurally safe (not burned with exposed and torn insulation).

Back to the PA: *the home needs to tell a story, a story that can be constructed through the artifacts that are present.* The PA's investigators are like archeologists. They reconstruct a narrative from material objects; the objects tell a story. But the objects in Mary Roland's home no longer told a story about Mary Roland – they told a story about the squatters that moved into and set fire to her house. Pieces of Mary Roland were still there, of course: her books and her other belongings, for instance, still told us something about who she had been, a well-educated, artistic African American woman who was a high school teacher. But they were no longer in good shape or in a logical order, and so the PA's objectives were complicated.

A final point that I want to make clear. It is not only the damage and destruction of physical property that affects the PA's ability to make a narrative. The *form* of this property also affects its market value—not only *what* it is, but *how it is arranged*. That is, when Ms. Roland's possessions were, as above, arranged in a nonsensical way, it negatively affected the PA's ability to construct a coherent narrative and therefore to realize the estate's market value. The PA searches homes according to a "home-logic". When the home does not follow that logic – when its arrangement becomes illogical—investigations and the ability to construct coherent narratives become challenging. The extent to which the illogical arrangement of stuff destroys market value becomes much more evident in the following story.

Part 2: Hoarding

Charles Granoff

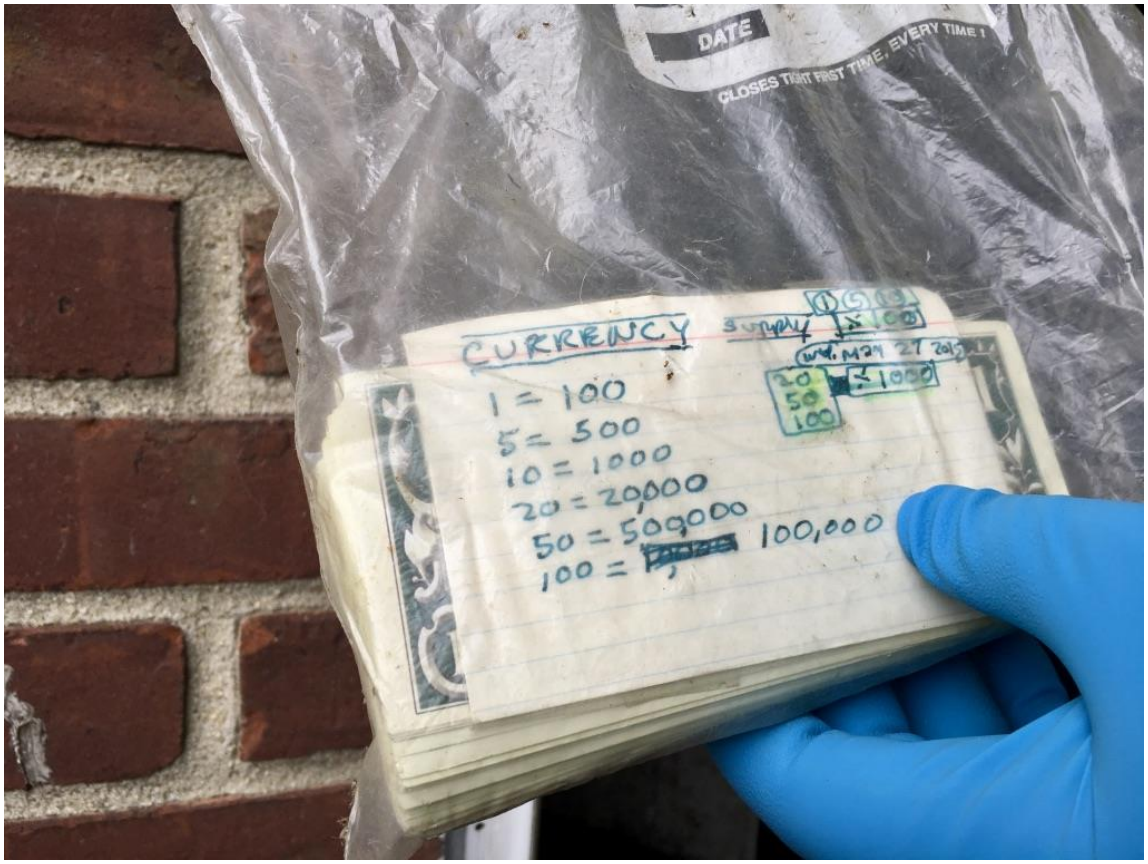
Like Mary Roland, Charles Granoff, who died his early 80s, owned a one-family home in Brooklyn. The day Pablo, Saeed, Mohammed and I went out to the house, we expected a long investigation – houses always took longer than apartments. Charles had died in the hospital, where his keys and personal effects were being held. Pablo picked up Charles' hefty set of keys from the hospital. We thought it was kind of funny that he had so many keys. We assumed we would easily get into the house to search.

We did not. The property was surrounded on all sides by gates topped with barbed wire. The front and back entrances were secured with several locks, which was why Charles had so many keys. We each took turns struggling to get the gates open, one lock at a time. Pablo tried the locks on the front gate, and then I tried, both of us unsuccessfully. We moved to the back gate. Saeed, a small-statured man, took the heavy set of keys and, crouching down, methodically went through each lock with each key. Some locks were heavy and rusted over, and even if the key fit, it took skill to click them open. One by one, Saeed patiently opened the locks. This took nearly half an hour. We clapped and patted Saeed on the back: we were in, or so we thought.

Charles had passed away only a few weeks earlier, but his yard, which surrounded the free-standing house on three sides, was completely overgrown. The front door was blocked by garbage cans and large bushes, and it would take some serious bushwhacking to get through it all. We collectively decided that Charles had probably used the back door and tried to open that one first. Like the front and back gates, the door was secured with multiple locks that were fastened from top to bottom, creating a vertical steel

barricade. Separating out the keys that had already opened the gate, Saeed knelt down with the remaining set and began the process all over again. Mohammed, Pablo and I watched and tried not to disturb Saeed's methodical work.

After another half an hour, the back door creaked open to reveal a heap of things: electric cables, bicycles, plastic bags, old saws, drills, radios, metal chains, and shovels. While we could pick at the stuff hanging immediately inside the door, there appeared to be no way of getting inside. The space looked not like a home but instead like a work shed — or maybe the entrance to a small, dark boiler room. Hanging immediately inside the entrance was another, larger set of keys, which we unhooked and held onto. Against one wall was a heap of baby blue baseball caps, all embroidered with characters from Archie Comics. I pulled these out carefully from between some rusty saws. Inside the brim of each hat was a stack of NYC Metrocard receipts. I set them back down, confused. On the opposite wall, next to a large assortment of work gloves hung a booklet entitled "How to Know God." Under a tangle of extension cords and bicycle chains, Muhammed pulled out a Ziploc bag filled with Monopoly money and an index card on which someone, presumably Charles, enumerated its contents and value, as if it were real and not play money. The hats, the booklet, and the fake money: all these items seemed out of place, and their details — the receipts, the carefully saved "money" — were puzzling. Leaving this confusing jumble behind, we moved on to the front entrance.



Saeed and Pablo struggled through the bushes and garbage cans to get to the front door. Working together, they attacked the door with our collection of keys, which had now grown to over forty. This absolutely *had* to be the entrance. Mohammed and I watched them from the other side of the bushes. We walked around the old Volkswagen Beetle in the backyard and looked into its windows. The car was stuffed full of things — umbrellas, bags, books, bathroom scales, and more — from the front to the back and from the bottom to the top. It looked as if the car was a plush toy, stuffed to maintain its shape. Mohammed pointed to all the security cameras mounted around the exterior of the house, watching us. They blinked red and appeared to be working. Signs were placed all

around the house warning us to “Keep Out.” What we observed revealed various things about Charles Granoff: he was a hoarder and apparently paranoid.



Saeed and Pablo finally got the front door open, only to find it completely blocked inside by a tall bookshelf loaded with binders and heavy boxes. It was even more impossible to get into this entrance than through the back. The objects inside the back entrance at least formed a concave shape, the center of the space deeper than the sides. Immediately inside the front door, on the other hand, was another immovable wall. There was only one more door we could try, also in the back of the house. I was sure this was how we would get in. After all, Charles needed some way to enter and exit his home.

We discovered, once Saeed pried the final door open, that it led to a small utility closet full of ladders, cables, construction equipment, and paint. Ironically, of all the entrances, this one absolutely did not lead into the house.

Pablo decided, and we all agreed, that it would be far too dangerous to try to gain entry through the windows, which were small and high up. After more than two hours of struggling with the keys, we packed up and went back to the office. We were not getting into the house that day.

In Mary Roland's case, the destruction of her property by squatters challenged the PA's narrative making in particular ways. It transformed her home from a coherent place with significant profit-making potential into an incoherent space with reduced profit-making potential. Charles Granoff's home was incoherent from the very beginning.

Hoarding – that is, the severe overaccumulation of stuff – is a form of destruction. Hoarding spaces are incoherent and, thus, the value of the hoarded objects (and the spaces themselves– houses, apartments) are destroyed. The squatters destroyed the coherence of Ms. Roland's house; Mr. Granoff himself had constructed and accumulated an incoherent – a "destroyed" – living space.

Our first visit to Charles' home presented us with several extreme moments of incoherence. The most incredible thing was that we could not actually get into his house. We were convinced that every single door we opened had to be an entrance, because a house needs an entrance. What is a house that you cannot even walk into? Is it even a house? Our most basic assumptions about the nature of a home were not met. At Ms. Roland's, the squatters had destroyed some of her home's structural integrity and things were strewn about the floor indiscriminately – for these reasons, it was an incoherent

space. But, in comparison to Mr. Granoff's, Ms. Roland's was coherent – at least one could enter and walk through it, albeit on top of clothes and papers. And the other "structure" on Charles' property – the car – was also so full of stuff that it had become like a single, solid object – it was no longer a car at all.

The doors were covered in locks and we had been given a giant set of keys; neither made sense. A front or back door to a house, in New York City, would ordinarily have two locks. The vertical steel barricade we encountered was one of the first visible signs that the house might be difficult to navigate, and that Mr. Granoff suffered from a psychological disorder. The house was also surrounded by barbed wire and surveillance cameras. Was there something of extraordinary value in the house, that had to be so closely protected? From what we saw, there was nothing of value inside; it looked like densely packed junk. Mr. Granoff's security measures were nonsensical. And his set of keys was comically large and heavy, impractical to carry around for anybody, much less an elderly man.

Apart from the signs of paranoia and overaccumulation, the way Mr. Granoff's objects were stored and presented did not make sense; as with Ms. Roland, their arrangement or *form* was incoherent. Play money had been counted and labeled as if it was real money. Many baseball caps had been stored together with stacks of Metrocard receipts inside their brims. Strange booklets and notes were scattered among the tools and cords stored directly inside the door. And immediately inside one of the other doors was a large bookcase heavy with objects, blocking any form of entry into the house. It was not just overaccumulation that made this space incoherent, it was the way these objects were placed, treated, and presented. Their bizarre presentation signaled that Mr. Granoff had a

pathological relationship to his things. It also meant that we could not "read" these objects as we would normally, in order to build a legible narrative about Mr. Granoff. In order to construct a narrative from material possessions and property, these objects and spaces had to be used in *expected* ways. But if they were clearly not used as expected, *then we could not make the assumptions that allowed us to construct decedent narratives*. Mr. Granoff's house, therefore, rather than helping us put together a story about his biography, assets, and social network, painted a confusing portrait of mental illness.

A few weeks later, the four of us returned to Mr. Granoff's house, where we met Peter, one of the office's clean-out contractors. This time Saeed brought only the keys that worked, and he quickly opened all the doors. Peter started with the front door, rapidly throwing box after box onto the front lawn to try to open up an entryway. While in other homes we would look through boxes somewhat carefully before setting them aside, the sheer volume of stuff made us all less careful and eager to just keep digging and *get in*. I watched as DVD players and boxes of DVDs, CDs, and tapes landed heavily on the mess of untrimmed bushes in the front yard. While Peter worked, Mohammed, Saeed, Pablo, and I sorted haphazardly through the stuff.

We made more puzzling discoveries. The binders were full of countless magazine clippings and photocopied book pages, some about kidnapped children. "Creepy," Pablo said, "why would he keep that? Who was this guy?" Mohammed opened one box of DVDs and I opened another. One box was labeled "Discipline" and contained BDSM pornography; the other also contained porn DVDs, with at least ten copies of each movie. Why on earth did Mr. Granoff have so much porn? Why was it so organized, and why

were there so many copies? Was he selling porn? This, to us, seemed like the only plausible explanation, and yet we wondered why this 80-year-old retiree was selling porn movies. *It did not make any sense.*



There were garbage cans sitting between and around the overgrown bushes. We assumed they were full of garbage. Like much of what we assumed about Mr. Granoff's house, we were wrong. Waiting for Peter to finish clearing out an entryway, Saeed pulled the top off a garbage can and discovered it was full of office supplies, mostly brand new post-its, staplers, and highlighters, all in their original packaging. We proceeded to open the other garbage cans, which were similarly full of new office supplies or more boxes of

meticulously organized DVDs. Mohammed shook his head as we looked through the trash cans. Every container — the home, the car, the garbage cans — was stuffed to the brim with things.

Saeed walked into the front entrance first, then Mohammed, then Pablo, and then I. None of us could get very far in, even after Peter cleared the passageway. We found more electronics: speakers, radios, and TVs. We found toy military tanks and GI Joes in their original packaging. The stuff was piled up so high that, walking over it, my head grazed the ceiling; accumulated things formed a secondary level in the house, and the stacked stuff created floor to ceiling walls.

Peter cleared out the back entrance, roughly throwing things out of the doorway until it was moderately passable. I walked through the narrow entranceway, on top of and in between bicycles and work tools, carefully avoiding the rows of rusty saws. As I moved ahead, the passageway opened up a bit so I could actually stand up straight and look around. There was a large room to my right: compared to the rest of the house, it was positively spacious. I noticed a collection of short brown women's wigs on styrofoam heads. Had these belonged, perhaps, to Charles' mother? To my left, I noticed a small bathroom, which seemed strangely ordinary in such an extraordinary house.

I continued down the passageway, walking carefully behind Saeed. We used our phone flashlights to light the way. I felt I was exploring an ancient cave but filled with things from the last forty years. The further we went down the passageway, the older the stuff became. DVDs and CDs turned into VHSes and cassette tapes, which eventually, at the back of the passageway, became LaserDiscs and vinyl LPs. Perhaps Charles' collecting had begun deep inside the house and, as he accumulated more, it grew further

out. The effect was akin to geological or archeological strata: the deeper you got, the earlier the layer had been formed.



That day was like a strange archeological dig. The material culture we excavated was *our* contemporary material culture, not the culture of an ancient era. But the way it was organized – stacks of the same product, over and over again, but in no discernable order, apart from an overall temporal trend– made the site difficult to comprehend, and if we were looking at something ancient and foreign, and not the belongings of a seemingly ordinary older man living just a subway ride away from our own homes.

Like Ms. Roland, some of the items we saw revealed personal details about Mr. Granoff. Boxes labeled by topic, in addition to the books, movies, and toys, gave us an impression of his character: "Real Estate," "J.P. Morgan," "War/Politics," "Psych," "History of the US: 1929-1988," "How to Read a Book." Mr. Granoff had been interested in history, maybe American military history, and, perhaps, had been a frequent reader. Near the end of the passageway, I found a framed certificate lying snugly against a wall of boxes, naming Mr. Granoff a Fellow of the American Association for Social Psychiatry. He had indeed been a psychiatrist, his neighbors later confirmed. They used to see patients visit Mr. Granoff in his home. That was a long time ago, though, they said.

After investigations we usually brought all the transportable items of value back to the office to keep in the vault. But we did not bring a single thing back from Charles' house. Where would we even start? The extraordinary house rendered all his shrink-wrapped products, both new and old, *meaningless* – we could not figure out what they said about Charles, except that he was an extreme hoarder – and *valueless* – in the end, we had to pay a contractor thousands of dollars to clean out the house completely, losing rather than gaining money on Charles' possessions, even though he had so many, including many in mint condition. Later, I learned that it took the contractor an entire month to clean out the house.

In a non-hoarder house, there was a standard, several-step process that would happen, in order to derive as much profit from a decedent's possessions as possible. The PA would first recover certain valuable items to bring back to the office, to get auctioned off. The estate would receive direct profits for each one of these items. Once this first round of objects was removed, the antiques dealers/junk luggers would be brought in to

bid on the remaining property. The PA would receive one payment for all these items in bulk. Then once the winner of this bid took all the objects that they wanted from the home, there would be a final bid to completely clean out the property. The PA would pay the winner of this bid to clean out the property. The first round of selling off objects required us, the PA, to walk through the whole house and take what was valuable back to the vault in the PA's office. The second round required the bidders to walk through the home and survey all the objects for their market value. The third round would also, typically, require the bidders to walk through the home to see if there were any objects they could still sell off in order to offset the cost of cleaning out the property completely. So all steps of dealing with a decedent's belongings required their home to be accessible and navigable. In Mr. Granoff's case, none of these steps were possible, because his house was not navigable. The best that could be done was the kind of cave diving that Saeed, Pablo, Mohammed, and I did during our second visit, in order to get some sense of what was in there. Even to do that kind of cave diving, however, we had to hire someone to clear out the passageways into the home, meaning that we were *already* losing money on his estate. In Mr. Granoff's case, we skipped steps one and two – we did not take any objects back to the office, and we did not receive a bulk payment from a bidder for objects they wanted from the house. Instead, we skipped to a modified version of step three – straight to the clean out, and asked the antiques dealers/junk luggers to bid on Mr. Granoff's house sight unseen – that is, they were not allowed to go cave diving before the bid, because it was potentially too dangerous. The PA could not risk the bidders getting hurt during a visit.

It took an entire month for the winning bidder to clean out the house – a month in which that bidder could have done several other jobs – so, for him, doing the Mr. Granoff clean out was a significant financial investment. Months later, I found Mr. Granoff's GI Joes being auctioned off for a surprising large amount of money on eBay by one of the antiques dealers I had interviewed during my fieldwork. I was shocked. These objects, once dug up, cleaned off, and organized, had recovered their value – but none of that recovered value would go to Mr. Granoff's estate.

Though we actually made it into Mr. Granoff's house during our second visit, it only made us more confused. Some things confused us because they did not fit our assumptions about Mr. Granoff's character. We found big containers full of meticulously organized porn DVDs, seemingly prepared for sale. From our very basic knowledge about Mr. Granoff's age and social class, however, it did not make sense that he was selling porn. But if he was not selling porn, then why did he have so many copies of each movie, and why were they so organized? The more little things were learned about Mr. Granoff – like, for example that he had been a psychiatrist – made the porn collections even more confusing. Of course, this was on top of the irony that a former psychiatrist had the most severely obvious mental illness that my colleagues and I had seen in years. In other words, some things we saw did not make sense because we tested them against our *expectations* of who Mr. Granoff had been. We tried to piece clues together, like detectives, but the clues did not fit, except, once more, to reveal something, more generally, about mental illness.

Making assumptions: the power of the PA's narrative task

At no point did it occur to any of us in the field, myself included, that Charles Granoff was not solely responsible for acquiring and arranging everything inside and outside of his house. The fact that this never occurred to us – and did not *need* to occur to us – demonstrates the power of the PA's narrative task. In service of building a coherent narrative, all kinds of assumptions have to be made. In our limited time, we have to assume that everything we find in the course of an investigation belongs to and was put where it was by the decedent (except for cases in which caretakers are doing the work of tidying up – as in the case of Mr. Berman. Mr. Berman's nurses cleaned the house, but the objects they tidied up were still *his objects*.). Of course, the real story is almost surely more complicated than what the PA assumes – but this does not matter. It does not matter to the validity of the PA's narrative. In Mr. Granoff's case we were there, with limited time, to put together as much of a coherent narrative about him as possible. If there was a will, we had to try to find the will. If there was family, we had to try to find family. And if there were valuable assets, we had to identify them within the time we were given – in no more than two, maximum three investigations. These investigations were real investigations, we did try to look through everything – all the rooms and drawers and closets and corners of the house – but there were many assumptions we had to make, and that we were expected to make. There was no incentive to question the provenance of the things we found in the field – they belonged to the decedents, no questions asked. We certainly wondered why Mr. Granoff owned the things that he owned, and why he stored them in such confusing (and dangerous) ways. We wondered why he kept the house so securely locked, why he surrounded it with barbed wire and surveillance cameras. There

was no reason, however, to question how exactly an elderly man carried all these objects to their storage spaces, and then navigated them in his daily life. If these things were not owned and arranged by Mr. Granoff, then PA's investigatory practices would not work. The PA had to assume that Mr. Granoff had carried and navigated these objects.

This did not mean we were not all curious about Mr. Granoff's story. We speculated out loud to each other: Pablo asked, flipping through the binders of news stories about missing children, "who was this guy?" He said that the binders were "creepy." But this is where Pablo's, and our, speculations ended. There was no point in digging further than we had to, and no time to dig, either. Mr. Granoff's narrative would be incomplete, like all our narratives. But for the PA's purposes, his narrative would be complete enough to lay his estate to rest. This is the power of the narrative impulse: it makes the unknowns irrelevant, giving an incomplete narrative a glossy sheen of coherence and completeness. Market value led us to and through a certain story – and narrative filled in where value led.

Concluding remarks

Ms. Roland's belongings had been destroyed and nothing of market value remained. Mr. Granoff had *so many* belongings that their market value had been destroyed. One story is an example of literal destruction and the other is an example of overaccumulation as a form of destruction. I put these two stories together because even though one decedent had almost *nothing* left and the other decedent had *too much* left, they were paradoxically alike. For the PA, too little (Ms. Roland's case) is the same as too much (Mr. Granoff's case).

In Ms. Roland's case, the squatters destroyed her property without prejudice. They destroyed the market value of countless items and wrecked the structure of her home. It is the PA's responsibility to record and preserve an estate's market value. Any behavior that destroys this market value is doing the opposite of the PA's directive and is thus pointless.

Mr. Granoff's was a case of pathological accumulation; he evidently had a severe case of hoarding disorder. Psychologist Michael Tompkins writes: "Hoarding is a clinical problem when the clutter or the saving behaviors significantly interfere with the person's ability to live comfortably and safely within his home" (Tompkins 2007: 25). The accumulation in and outside of Mr. Granoff's home would have interfered significantly with his ability to live comfortably and safely in his home.

How do we define a coherent relationship to material objects? For the Public Administrator's purposes, a coherent relationship is one that tells a predictable story through a decedent's objects of market value. The more objects of market value that a decedent has, the more substantial their narrative will be. Ms. Roland and Mr. Granoff are two extreme examples of the PA's expectations not being met, of its narrative-making practices faltering because the destruction of market value made it impossible to narrate a coherent relationship between a decedent and their material posessions. But how often are the PA's expectations actually met? Do most people really have "coherent" relationships to their stuff? What about PA decedents in particular?

In fact, though decedents were diverse in many ways, one trend that I noticed during my fieldwork was hoarding behavior. Charles Granoff was the most extreme example I encountered during my research, but there were plenty more decedents who

hoarded objects in apparently pathological ways. Several decedents hoarded newspapers. One even rented an entire apartment just to store decades worth of newspapers. Another decedent hoarded lightbulbs and plastic bags. Others hoarded mail and brand-new clothing. What did this indicate about PA decedents? And what did this suggest about the PA's narrative-making practices?



PA decedents always lived alone, and, on average, had fewer social connections. Like Mary Roland, many New Yorkers were isolated, and, rather than stories told by friends and family, their stuff had to tell their stories. Does the fact that so many decedents hoarded objects suggest that their relationships to material possessions had taken the place of their relationships to actual people? Here is a related question: if the PA relies on relationships to material objects in order to construct these narratives, then

isn't the PA *also* treating material objects like people? And finally, is it *pathological* to replace personal relationships with relationships to things? By presenting this series of questions, I am proposing that the PA's excessive reliance on objects as markers of identity itself suggests a pathological relationship to objects. The irony, however, is that the estates of the hoarders, whose relationship to things is an extension of the PA's own logic, are incoherent to the PA's practices. Does the capitalist culture that produces the PA's logic of narrative-making (that more possessions you have of material value, the more you will be remembered) produce exactly the kind of narrative impasse that stops the PA's work in its tracks?

Chapter 4 | When Death Gets Personal

At the PA's office, a "death" becomes an "estate." No longer associated with loss, an estate is a project to work on, a puzzle to figure out. Each project has components that bring you closer to the death itself. Even during investigations, however, death's reality rarely emerged, not to me, nor, as far as I could observe, to my colleagues. The emotional impact of loss is dampened when death is viewed only through its second-hand markers.

Professional distance, however, faltered when death became personal, and it could become personal in different ways. Death's reality as a devastating moment of loss was mostly ignored by myself and my PA colleagues until certain moments of breakage when it simply could no longer be ignored. The distance we took from death, and these moments of breakage, were not consequences of "bureaucratic indifference" but rather emerged from a state of "limited caring." We cared about decedents, but only to a limited extent, and largely as an act of self-preservation.

Mr. Crosby

Philip Crosby was 92 when he died. On a cold, sunny morning in March, we made our way from the office down to his building. Mr. Crosby's apartment was on the top floor of a five-story walk-up. Winded from the climb, Pablo, Mohammed and I marveled at how such an old man could make it up the stairs every day. The building's super told us that Mr. Crosby was in remarkable shape for his age and climbed the stairs to his apartment up and down every day without fail.

Philip Crosby's home was tidy. He kept his personal papers and bills organized in filing cabinets in the living room. This made it easy for us to find what we were looking for: bank statements, personal IDs, and medical records.

The next room was filled with more filing cabinets and a heavy wooden armoire that housed Mr. Crosby's massive and meticulously organized stamp collection. We shuffled through binders and boxes full of stamps. Each binder corresponded to a different decade and country: Bhutan had colorful, triangular stamps with sketches of mythical creatures; a page of the Belgium binder depicted a Hieronymus Bosch painting, split across detachable stamps. The many unusual stamps put me, Pablo, and Mohammed in a good mood. Pablo told me that he loved this kind of old stuff, that these were the moments that he treasured in his work. Mr. Crosby's was a pleasant, well-organized apartment, full of interesting things. This was fun and easy work: no smells left by a dead body, no disorienting mess, and just enough unusual stuff hidden in drawers to keep our search exciting.

The three of us continued our investigation. We were trying to move fast, leaving drawers hanging open and tossing books, folders, and binders onto the ground, as we usually did. There was always more work to get to and more apartments to see; we did not have the time to be meticulous or too careful.

In the middle of our search, Mr. Crosby's girlfriend Dana entered the apartment. As soon as I saw her, I felt embarrassed to be rummaging rapidly through his things, carelessly flinging papers off the desks and out of the drawers. These objects no longer belonged to a semi-imaginary man whose interests and life we could speculate freely about, engaging in a kind of archeological game. Suddenly we were faced with a

reminder that Philip Crosby was a real person whose death had been a real loss to others. Since the very beginning of my work at the PA's office, this was a feeling that I had learned to ignore almost completely. And I was happier for it. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised that I had managed to put this feeling out of my mind and conduct my seemingly dark and depressing fieldwork in a mostly unbothered state of mind.

A State of "Limited Caring"

Until this point, I have discussed the emotional landscape of the PA's work – its discoveries, disappointments, and frustrations – but have shied away from, specifically, death's emotional impact on myself and my PA colleagues. This avoidance reflects the cadence of the PA's work. Death, as an emotionally disturbing form of real loss, is ignored until it suddenly cannot be ignored any longer.

How did my colleagues and I sustain ourselves emotionally when constantly faced with death? Decedents are strangers; their deaths are not personal. We did not feel a personal sense of loss and this reduced death's emotional strain on myself and my PA colleagues.

Being exposed to death every day lessened its impact. And death was "a job"; my colleagues got paid to deal with it on a daily basis.

My colleagues told me that, over time in the office, they become less sensitive to death. Saeed, who managed the estates of nursing home residents, would arrange burials almost daily. After several weeks of sending many bodies of decedents to the city cemetery (colloquially known as the "Potter's Field"), Saeed told me he was worried he was becoming insensitive. The city cemetery was supposed to be a last resort; decedents

only got buried there, for free, when they had no money, or virtually no money, in their estate. Maybe he was sending too many people too quickly to the city cemetery, because it was easy. Maybe he should have been working harder to get decedents buried somewhere better. He wondered whether sending so many decedents to the city cemetery had made him a "bad person." He jokingly wondered out loud whether he might be punished in the afterlife. Though it was clear that Saeed said this jokingly, he was quite religious, and so there was a degree of seriousness to what he said. During this conversation in the office, Saeed talked to me and Quentin about how insensitive he often sounded on the phone:

> Saeed: The guy that was calling me the other day, "My brother died!" I was, like, "Okay." I should have said "Okay, I'm sorry," but it's like, I don't know.

> Me: Well, for them it doesn't happen often.

> Saeed: I was, like, okay…it's a job, you know, this is a job for me.

> Quentin: You go out on these investigations and you see exactly what's going on. So the veil has been lifted from your eyes.

Saeed: Yeah, it's like now – how can I help you – you know, this is a job for me. Right?

When death occurs with such relentless regularity, there is little time to linger on the details. If my colleagues and I sounded and felt indifferent to decedents' fates – and this was much rarer than I first imagined – it emerged from a pace of work that *could not but* produce indifference. Seen from the inside, indifference was inevitable, because of the conditions that created it. Indifference was also a tool necessary for survival – until it could no longer be sustained.

In fact, our work was not characterized by indifference. Ignoring death's reality as a form of real loss did not mean that we were indifferent; we still cared about estates. But that caring had to be limited because our time and emotional capacity were limited.

Such a state of "limited caring" persisted until it could not any longer. That moment – the particular moment of breakage, of our coping mechanisms faltering – is what I examine here. In the field there were certain moments when the routine was broken, when things became uncomfortable, or they became sad, or disturbing. Maybe, seen from the outside, you might say that these moments showed the limits of bureaucratic indifference. But to call the PA's standard attitude bureaucratic indifference would show a complete misunderstanding, a total mischaracterization of its work. What actually prevailed in the PA's work was, rather, a kind of selective blindness to the disturbing realities of death. The need to move on, for my colleagues to "limit" their caring, was also an ethical decision. There were constantly cases coming into the office, and if we spent too much time on one case in the field, then the others would suffer. One

had to keep moving on, not only to sustain oneself emotionally, but also because all the decedents needed our attention. Therefore moving on, that is, "limiting" our care, was also an ethical decision.

In *The Social Production of Indifference*, Michael Herzfeld claims that bureaucrats and their clients "invoke simplistic images of an inexorable system and its faceless servants for ends that have to do with self-justification" (Herzfeld 1993: 46). In other words, clients frequently invoke the stereotype of the indifferent bureaucrat to deal with their frustrations with state bureaucracies. And bureaucrats themselves invoke similar stereotypes – that they are "faceless servants" stuck in an "inexorable system" – in order to justify their own disappointing work. This is certainly true, sometimes. But Herzfeld's book, which notably is not based on any participant observation, does not ask *how* the *appearance* of bureaucratic indifference emerges in any real ethnographic contexts. The emotional distance PA workers take from their cases is both a survival mechanism and *not that distant* – it is by no means "indifferent". These details matter, particularly to an anthropologist whose mission is to look at the world in ethnographic detail where other disciplines generalize. The problem is that Herzfeld writes about bureaucrats "as a kind of person" and not as "persons who sometimes engage in a kind of activity" (Bernstein and Mertz 2011, 7).

In their introduction to a "Symposium on Bureaucracy: Ethnography of the State in Everyday Life" in the *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, Bernstein and Mertz write that, in a real ethnographic context – that is, in an actual bureaucracy – bureaucrats are "just like people in all sorts of other settings, constantly make decisions, interact with others, exceed their own control" (Bernstein and Mertz 2011: 7). "Anthropologists have

been slow to treat state bureaucracy as a site for ethnography," Bernstein and Mertz continue, "and bureaucrats as participants in a complex social arena" (Bernstein and Mertz 2011: 7). Anthropologists have argued that bureaucracies enact structural violence (Gupta 2012), and that bureaucracy is inherently shallow and its legitimacy depends on the threat of physical violence (Graeber 2012). More ethnographies focus on the clients of bureaucracies rather than on the bureaucrats themselves (e.g. Auyero 2012, Verdery 1997). However, demonstrating that bureaucrats are real people making real decisions on a daily basis emerges most clearly from fieldwork that is done among bureaucrats – not among clients. Some ethnographies based on long-term participant observation in bureaucracies illustrate, as Bernstein and Mertz suggest, bureaucrats as actual people and not as "types" of people (e.g. Schertz 2011, Sandvik 2011, Hoag 2008, Pinker 2015, Mathur 2016, Bolt 2022). In a special issue on the ethnography of bureaucracy published in the *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, Bear and Mathur similarly struggle with anthropologists' tendency to associate bureaucracy "with disenchanted iron cages of modernity" that are not "generative of…ethical and affective politics" (Bear and Mathur 2015: 19). Bear and Mathur's collection of ethnographic articles, also based on long-term participant observation, explores how bureaucracies work towards the "public good." More recently, a collection of ethnographic writing on bureaucracy in the *Critique of Anthropology* explored how the State makes the middle-class through its normative commitments (Bolt & Schubert 2022).

My work is different. Some existing bureaucratic literature focuses on how, through minute practices and decision-making, bureaucracies create certain values and moral goods for the communities that they serve. But here I am focused on the emotional

landscape of the work itself – that is, of the way that bureaucrats cope with their work. My aim in discussing this is not to show the creation of some greater social good or values, like "middle-class values," but rather to understand how bureaucrats themselves negotiate the weird coexistence of bureaucracy and intimacy. That is, I write about the emotions and coping mechanisms of the bureaucrats – my PA colleagues, and myself.

These moments affected me and my PA colleagues in different ways. In this chapter the different stories that I tell reflect different levels of agreement between the way I felt and the way that my colleagues felt. Sometimes there was a strong disconnect between how I felt and they felt. Sometimes it seemed to overlap, to an extent. And sometimes it was very clear that we were all feeling the same thing.

In this chapter I describe and consider my emotional reactions in the field to moments of breakage in the PA's work. As I discuss in the preface, I use my own discomfort as a kind of barometer, in order to think analytically about what the PA is doing. In a chapter about emotions, I am my own best piece of evidence. The emotions of others are much more difficult to access, to elicit, to understand, especially when those emotions are difficult ones. I therefore linger on myself here, carefully considering why, when, and how I react to breakages in the field. Where possible, I also consider the emotions of my colleagues. Because I was simultaneously both anthropologist and PA employee, my own emotional reactions also reveal something about how the practices and goals of my discipline, anthropology, contrasted with the practices and goals of the Public Administrator. The disconnect I felt between myself and my colleagues was a consequence of our distinct disciplines coexisting with one another.

In the previous chapter, the PA's work of narrative making encountered an impasse when possessions of material value were destroyed. In this chapter, I examine several cases in which the PA's work faltered in the face of death as a personal loss. Both chapters examine particular challenges that I saw and felt the PA encounter in the course of its work.

Mr. Crosby, continued

Dana had arranged to come by Philip's place while we were conducting the investigation. She had paid for his funeral and the PA was legally required to compensate her for "reasonable" funerary expenses from the money in Philip's estate account. Though Dana was what the PA called a "funeral creditor," only the PA was legally permitted to open up and search Philip's sealed apartment. If Dana wanted to see or take anything from the apartment, this was likely her only chance. Pablo, who was in charge of the investigation, would have to approve of anything she took, take a photo of the item, and record it in his report.

There we were – Pablo, Mohammed and I – legally appointed to search Mr. Crosby's home. We had never met Mr. Crosby. Nearly everything we knew about him had been learned in the last hour. And then there was Dana, his longtime companion, only allowed in the apartment through our – three strangers' – institutional and personal generosity.

The three of us were doing everything right. We tried to get through everything in the apartment quickly while comprehensively evaluating the size of his estate. If our work was too slow and meticulous, we would have less time for other estates. This would

be a disservice to others. All the lives that we put to rest deserved our care: not only was this an ethical principle but it was a legal requirement of the PA's work. But despite doing everything right – and I genuinely believed that the logic behind the PA's practices was reasonable – I felt intensely uncomfortable. In Dana's presence, our work felt to me like a violation.

Dana was looking for a letter that Philip had written to her before he died, and for a painting that she had given him as a present. She found the letter and shared it with us. It was an informal will, written by Philip, leaving most of his possessions to her. Since there was no official will, just this letter, Dana would not inherit the things that Philip had apparently meant for her. She told us that she knew this but wanted to take the letter anyway. Pablo allowed Dana to take the letter and the painting because they would not add any value to the estate. This again felt strange to me: as Mr. Crosby's companion, shouldn't Dana be allowed to take any items she wanted?

I frowned. Philip had no children or close living family. I turned to Mohammed and told him I wished that Dana could just inherit all of Philip's stuff. It felt unfair. But, as Mohammed reminded me, Philip hadn't made the appropriate arrangements. Nothing could be done.

Pablo, Mohammed, and I eventually finished up in the apartment. Pablo locked up and we piled back into the car. On the drive back to the office, I continued complaining about Dana's situation. Not only did it seem unfair, I said, but she was an elderly woman and she looked sad. I felt bad for her. Pablo and Mohammed said they agreed but reminded me that there was nothing to do. All we could do was treat Dana with kindness,

reimburse her for her funeral expenses, and allow her to take what she wanted. There was no reason to dwell on the subject because nothing could be changed.

There was a subtle disconnect that day between me, Pablo, and Mohammed, which emerged from our different positions and stakes in the situation. It was their professional duty to move on. It was my professional duty to linger on what had happened, to investigate in order to thickly describe and analyze lives and communities. But I *also* had to move on. I was going to the PA's office almost every day, doing at least one or two investigations a week. Even though, according to my disciplinary research method, I was supposed to dwell on what I had experienced, I also needed to sustain myself in this emotionally difficult work. If each death "got to me," if I took each death "personally," I would have trouble completing the fieldwork that I started. I found myself, therefore, somewhere in the middle. I cared about decedents, but only to a limited extent. And I selectively dwelt on certain estates that I found interesting, while paying little attention to others.

Moreover, I was not only investigating the estates of the PA's decedents, but also studying the PA's employees – my colleagues – as ethnographic subjects. To do this, I learned and mimicked their work; I talked to them and asked questions. I tried to understand, through my immersion as a PA employee and through our conversations, why my colleagues worked the way that they did. The fact that they could often "move on" more easily than I could was something that I wanted to understand. *How* did they "move on" from the deaths they endlessly faced? And what was the purpose of "moving on"?

In retrospect, I am not sure if I crafted my attitude towards the decedents purposely, or if it just fell into place during fieldwork. But it seemed to sustain me for most of my research. There were moments when the balance I maintained between caring and not caring about decedents tipped one way or the other. In some cases, caring was an uplifting act; in other cases, it dragged me down and I was unable to face my fieldwork for periods of time. If I did not get at least a little emotionally involved in estates, the work became extremely dull. This happened to me when I worked on projects that required me to be in the office most of the time. There was a lot of work in the office that was tangential to death and to the stories of decedents' lives. I was not explicitly reminded of loss, but the work – filing papers, closing bank accounts, editing legal documents – was dull and a little bit soul-crushing. I knew that many of my colleagues suffered from similar feelings of boredom, even out on investigations. Maria, for instance, told me she was initially thrilled to go on investigations, but after a while all the homes and decedents began to blend together and the work became dull. Although, like me, Mohammed preferred going out in the field to staying in the office, he agreed. Because he was an assistant to both Pablo and Paul, he went on investigations nearly every day.

Sometimes, as with Philip's investigation, I started to care too much. By "too much" I mean that it began to interfere with my work as a PA employee and I felt emotionally distressed. I could sense these moments distinctly because a certain tension would develop between me and my PA colleagues. On Philip's investigation, Pablo and Mohammed politely listened to me but I could feel they were getting frustrated.

Investigations begin to feel awkward.

Often there were no close relatives or intimate friends present during investigations, not because they were forbidden to participate, but because they either did not exist, or were not easily located. By the very nature of their position, PA employees rarely experienced the unique discomfort of being watched by the deceased's intimate relations.

Sometimes, distant or estranged relatives came along on investigations. I never felt particularly bothered by this because these people did not know the decedent much better than we did.

But sometimes, like Dana, these visitors had been very close to the decedent, and this was when things started feeling awkward. These kinds of investigations were inevitable because the PA's role, though *meant* to fill in the absence of relatives and friends, ended up extending to other kinds of estates. Particularly when a New Yorker had no children but was by no means isolated, the PA's intervention could feel inappropriate. But in the absence of a will, the rules of intestate succession turned to close family, and if the decedent relied on a fictive family of friends, and not on blood relations, then the people they were closest to had no legal right to their property.

Hasan

Hasan's death only disturbed me the second time I went out on an investigation of his estate. And it was hard to pinpoint why, exactly, I was so bothered – the facts of other cases had been equally disturbing.

The first time, Pablo, Mohammed, and I drove to a large parking garage almost an hour away from the office. We came to look at a new Audi that had belonged to Hasan, a decedent who had committed suicide in his home several months earlier. Hasan had worked in IT at a prestigious brokerage firm in Manhattan. He owned a pretty yellow two-story house on a pleasant street in an upper-middle-class neighborhood.

Hasan was Pakistani. He had come to the US more than a decade earlier, but his family was still in Pakistan so they could not serve as administrators of his estate. The PA's office was appointed in their place. Once his car and house were sold, and the PA's contracted attorneys prepared the final accounting, the family would inherit the value of his estate.

We arrived at the parking garage that was attached to a Century 21 department store and found Hasan's car. It was in immaculate shape.

As we would in any decedents' home, we searched the car for information of interest, and in particular for the deed to the vehicle. All we found in the trunk was an old blanket and a cardboard box. There were a couple of half-empty water bottles in the backseat, like there would be in any car. Pablo, Mohammed and I sat inside the vehicle. Pablo tried the ignition to make sure the car would start, and it did.

We searched through the glove compartment and, instead of a deed, found a few CDs. Mohammed, who is also Pakistani, recognized the names on the CDs, and enthusiastically described them to us as he put one into the car's CD player. We sat in the car listening to joyful religious music for some time while Mohammed smiled and explained its meaning. Pablo and I agreed that the music was wonderful. By the time we got back in our own car and returned to the office, the three of us were in high spirits.

While the facts of Hasan's death were disturbing, the investigation that day opened up a moment of joy, expression, and cultural exchange.

Things were different on my second investigation. A few months after our trip to the parking garage, I accompanied Pablo and Mohammed to the clean-out bid for Hasan's house. The office's biannual real estate auction was coming up and in advance of the auction, the property, which was up for sale, had to be cleaned out. A few of the office's regular clean out guys met us at the house. We walked through the house with them as they looked around, balancing the cost of cleaning everything with their potential profit from reselling the contents of the home.

This was my first visit to Hasan's house. Mohammed and Pablo had already been there months earlier during their first investigation. I walked through the bare living room and kitchen. Even though none of the home's contents had been cleaned out yet, apart from some personal and financial paperwork, it was nearly empty and there was almost no furniture. I followed Mohammed up the carpet-covered stairs. There was a spacious bedroom and smaller guest room on the second floor. At the front of the house, facing the street, was a bathroom. The door was open and I could see the shower curtain tucked into the bathtub. Mohammed motioned towards the bathroom and told me, "That's where he did it, in the shower." I averted my eyes and walked in the opposite direction towards the back window. "I talked to his ex-wife," Mohammed said, following me. "She asked us for some photographs. She was still very sad."

"Uh huh," I said, not particularly wanting to hear more.

"She said that he couldn't sleep. For months. That's why he killed himself."

"That sounds terrible," I said. "There must be some medication for that. That he didn't take."

Surely this kind of tragedy did not just happen, I thought. A person did not just stop sleeping and lose their will to live. There must have been some solution that Hasan never explored. While Hasan's death did not bother me when we visited his car, it was beginning to feel more disturbing in this new context. We were now in the place where he had killed himself. The car had been far away in a parking lot.

I was rapidly trying to find ways to comfort myself. I talked to Mohammed about psychotropic drugs and insomnia medication. I talked to Pablo about how Hasan could have sought help. If I could think of ways that Hasan might have saved himself, then his story and his house would feel less disturbing.

Still, I felt as empty as the house. Something about its lack of decoration and furniture made the atmosphere unsettling. There were no objects to amuse and distract me, no CDs to listen to or binders of stamps to look at, just the silence of a sparsely furnished home padded with thick, clean carpeting, and the mopped-up memory of a life forsaken. Hasan's home had so much space but so little color. This was rare in New York City; most homes we visited were the opposite. I wondered how Mohammed seemed so at ease in this space. And I was surprised when he told me where Hasan had committed suicide. I normally wanted to know as much about decedents as possible, especially eager to hear their stories. This felt different, though. It felt too sad and too close. Investigations were, by their nature, voyeuristic, and exploring people's lives in their absence was work that the three of us enjoyed – though "enjoy" may seem like a strange word here. But this time we had looked too far into Hasan's private life. I appreciated Mohammed's

willingness to tell me everything but was surprised when he shared the disturbing details. Judging from Pablo, Mohammed, and everyone else's behavior in the house that day, though, I was the only one so obviously disturbed by the situation.

Meanwhile, the clean out guys searched the house quickly; there was very little to look through. All the guys – Omar, Pedro, John, Joe, and Manny – headed down from the second floor and up from the basement to gather in the living room. They were ready to place their bids. Pablo handed out the forms and envelopes. Each guy found his own corner of the room, jotted down a figure, signed, and sealed the envelope. I gathered up the bids and Pablo, Mohammed and I walked into the kitchen, out of the group's sight. We ripped open the envelopes. I always found this part of the job kind of fun. Like picking lottery winners. I was briefly distracted and felt better.

$3,000 …. $7,000 … $1500 … $900 … $1300. $900 it was.

"Would you like to do the honors?" Pablo asked me.

"Sure," I said. I walked into the living room, where the guys were chatting about their other clean-out jobs.

"It's yours!" I said as I handed John his winning bid. The PA would pay him 900 dollars to clean the place out completely and he could do whatever he wanted with what he found.

Pablo talked to John about his schedule. The house had to be cleaned out soon. John took the keys to the house and told us that he was going to start work immediately. I heard that John sometimes slept in the houses he cleaned out so he could finish jobs faster. I wondered whether John would sleep in this house which, to me, in its emptiness, felt haunted.

Mohammed and I walked outside with the other guys. They were heading to their next jobs and we were going to grab some lunch and go back to the office. It was overcast and about to rain. I was eager to leave. We said goodbye and made our way back to the car.

Pablo and Mohammed had already been to the house; they already knew what it looked like and where everything was. Perhaps this was the why both of them seemed so at ease and I was not. To me, the place and the specifics of the story were all new. Hasan's story had not yet been buried in my mind under the stories of more decedents and more investigations. At the PA's office, the impact of such disturbing stories always seemed to peter out after time. Our attention was taken to so many other places that what seemed sad or urgent or exceptional or disturbing was inevitably not soon after. This was comforting.



I did not take many pictures in Hasan's house, like I usually did. Looking back at my photos that day, I only took one of the house's exterior. There was nothing unusual to capture inside apart from its emptiness. The only place of note in the house was the site of Hasan's suicide, and it felt too strange to take a photo there.

My aversion to Hasan's home was immediate and visceral. It felt inappropriate to take photos because the home was the site of Hasan's suicide: I did not want to violate the space. But I had been to other homes in which people had taken their own lives, and I did not hesitate then. Perhaps I took photos in these other homes because they had more interesting interiors, more furniture and artwork and personal items that distracted from the suicides. Perhaps I had been in a particularly sensitive mood on the day of Hasan's

home visit. Maybe I had been on too many investigations in a row and was feeling burned out. I know that I did not want to intensify my uneasiness by taking photographs. I did not want to spend too much time in the house, either. It was as if the more time I spent inside, and the more images I captured, the closer Hasan's fate would come to me – the more it would creep into and destroy my own sense of emotional well-being.

Mohammed, Pablo, and I all experienced moments of emotional breakage on the job. Maybe this happened to them and to my other colleagues more often than I suspected. These moments were so personal and difficult, it was hard to see them in other people, and even harder to convince others to talk about them. It is even difficult for me to write about my own emotional difficulties, because it forces me to experience them again.

Pablo's emotional difficulties, whose magnitude surprised me and my colleagues, always remained a mystery. While he eventually opened up to Mohammed, Pablo and I never discussed them. His problems began in the field one day, while I was traveling. Pablo felt as if he was having a heart attack and asked Quentin to call an ambulance. Hearing the story, I suspected that it had been a panic attack. I knew from personal experience what panic attacks were like, although mine had never been so severe. Physically, Pablo was healthy, thin, and only in his mid-40s – not at apparent risk for a heart attack. He was taken away, hyperventilating in an ambulance. Pablo was gone for one week, then two. When I came back from my trip, Bill pulled me aside and told me that Pablo was on leave, but he never shared any specifics. Quentin told me the story and said he was worried about Pablo. Mohammed and I talked about Pablo, too. I heard from certain people in the office that Pablo had been acting erratically during the last month. I

had never noticed anything. I, along with many others in the office, sent Pablo messages wishing him a speedy recovery and a quick return to the office, but we never received any response.

Pablo's leave of absence stretched on month after month. I got the sense, along with others in the office, that he was experiencing mental health issues, perhaps a flare-up of a previously diagnosed condition. I had noticed some of Pablo's hypochondriacal tendencies before, particularly in the home where he had ultimately experienced the pain that sent him to the hospital, a house we had been to together before the incident. When Pablo was ready to come back, he tried to set one condition for his return: no trips to the field. He only wanted to do office work. Clearly, something about field investigations had disturbed him. Going to decedents' homes was not just "fine," or just "a job," or a bureaucratic routine, or even a fun archeological game. There was something about the work that had broken him, temporarily.

The emotional landscape of the PA's work is varied and complex. PA workers sustain themselves by building up a shield of "limited caring" about the cases that they work on. At the PA's office it seems necessary and inevitable to build an emotional shield, if merely to survive. It is inevitable because the large number of deaths constantly referred to the PA cannot each be experienced deeply by a limited and underpaid staff. It is a survival mechanism because the emotional and intellectual impact of death has to be minimized in order to be able to continue working on new cases nearly every day. There is never enough time, and there is never enough emotional and intellectual capacity. I learned this from my many conversations and shared experiences with work colleagues. I also knew this first-hand because I experienced it myself.

The detachment practiced by physicians, who also frequently work around death, is often thought of as a professional necessity, and yet bureaucratic detachment is often seen as cruel, violent, or, at best, "stupid" (Graeber 2016). My PA colleagues, low-level bureaucrats, were less educated than doctors and poorly paid. And in the field, my colleagues were only sometimes respected. I remember an investigation – a very brief one, during which we searched one sparsely furnished room – when the decedent's acquaintances, who were gathered outside her room, began yelling at us, insisting we had no right to search through her intimate things. During another investigation, a decedent's landlord became furious, telling us that the decedent had been an intensely private man, and searching through his things was unethical. In both cases, they threatened to report us to our bosses.

Though my PA colleagues maintained a necessary attitude of "limited caring" about decedents, there was also a constant emotional connection to and involvement with their cases. Both were equally true, and both had their particular consequences. The emotional landscape of the PA's work is characterized by a push and pull between distance/detachment and care.

Rosa

Rosa was a German fashion photographer who died when she was only thirty-nine years old. Not long after she passed, Paul, Maria, and I conducted an investigation in her home. Rosa lived in a warehouse building in Dumbo that had been converted into high-end luxury housing. Dumbo had once been an industrial waterfront neighborhood. Artists began living in Dumbo's industrial buildings in the early 1990s, seeking cheap rents and large

spaces for their work. By the mid 2010s, the neighborhood had become a tourist destination. Living in Dumbo, with its charming cobblestone streets and spectacular views of lower Manhattan, had also become extremely expensive. Although some of the PA's decedents were wealthy, we rarely went on investigations to buildings as upscale as Rosa's.

We met Rosa's older sister Camila that day, who was visiting from Brussels to take care of her sister's affairs. Rosa was not yet buried and her family, who lived in Europe, wanted to hold her funeral in Germany. Shipping Rosa's body to Germany, however, required her passport, which the family did not possess. Maria, Paul, Camila, and I had to find the missing passport together; we assumed it was somewhere in the apartment.

We waited for Camila in the lobby, which was located in an atrium covered by an expansive glass roof. I had never seen such a fancy lobby in a residential building. Maria and I looked at each other in disbelief. A shiny concierge counter occupied one side of the room and the walls were decorated with large pop-art paintings. In the center of the lobby, there were wide glass coffee tables set in between black leather couches. Paul, Maria, and I took a seat.

The tables were set with massive contemporary art books featuring Basquiat, Koons, and Ai Wei Wei. I watched as one of the building's residents walked into the lobby with her son. She spoke to a uniformed man, who nodded and quickly disappeared behind a curtain. She made herself a drink at an espresso machine while her son took a brownie from a shiny silver tray. Minutes later, the man emerged with her dry cleaning.

I watched this all with a mix of jealousy and resentment. Whose everyday life required this kind of luxury? Paul sat across the table, looking out of place, his eyes downcast. Maria pointed to the swanky gas fireplace set inside a wide stainless-steel

rectangle. “Look at that, it’s so beautiful,” she said. I nodded, grimacing, “This place is too much.”

Camila, an elegantly dressed middle-aged woman, arrived in the lobby. We introduced ourselves; she somberly shook our hands and looked around nervously. The building’s super, dressed in a uniform with his name embroidered on the front, approached us and suggested we go to the apartment. He led us down the hall to the elevator, which we took in silence up to the sixth floor.

By this time, I had already spent years in and out of the PA’s office. Though I was accustomed to the work, investigations accompanied by relatives or close friends of the deceased still made me uneasy. As we left the elevator, Paul explained that Maria and I – whom he affectionately called “the two ladies” – were there to help out with the search. Camila smiled weakly and nodded. I asked her if she lived in Brussels. Yes, she responded, but her parents lived in a small town in Germany’s Black Forest. This was where she and her sister Rosa had grown up.

As we continued down the hall to Rosa’s apartment, I overheard Paul ask the super quietly, out of Camila’s earshot, if he had found the body. The super said yes – he discovered Rosa while conducting routine maintenance.

Usually, for investigations where the decedent died in their apartment, I would dab a little Vaporub under my nose to minimize the smell. Rosa’s apartment did not smell strongly, however. She was found soon after she passed, and the building, with its high lofted ceilings and high-tech ventilation system, was designed to prevent smells from lingering.

We entered the apartment. It would have been difficult to walk in only with Paul and Maria, but Camila’s presence compounded the awfulness several-fold. The apartment was

hard to look at. The first thing I noticed were the empty bottles of Corona beer stacked against the wall. At first I thought this was where Rosa left her recycling, but as we walked further into the apartment we saw empty beer bottles everywhere. There were empty liquor and wine bottles, too – on the kitchen counter, the coffee table, the couch, on the bed, and in the bathtub. I was silent. Ahead of me, in the apartment, I heard Camila let out a sigh.

The apartment was not just messy like the many homes I had seen before. It looked like something had gone very wrong; like a space in which somebody had destroyed themselves. No one told me or Maria the cause of death before we entered the apartment. It became obvious to both of us, however, that Rosa had committed suicide and drank herself to death. After Camila walked into the next room, Maria turned to me and whispered, "I think she killed herself." "Yeah, I think so too," I said nervously. I felt embarrassed to be there, in Camila's presence. This was her first time in the apartment since her sister's death. From her body language, Camila seemed embarrassed too –three strangers were seeing, at the same time as she, what had happened to her sister. While Maria and I both hesitated for a moment, Paul walked straight into the kitchen and began searching for the passport.

Maria walked over to Camila and helped her look through the closet. In Rosa's bedroom, her mattress had been knocked over diagonally into the bed frame. White sheets lay crumpled up on the bare mattress and splattered with a dark brownish red. In the bathroom, where the bathtub was filled with empty bottles, the same shade of dark red lay in splotches around the toilet.

The four of us searched for Rosa's passport. Paul worked in the kitchen, Maria helped Camila in the living room, and I sorted through her bedroom night table, which seemed like good place to keep personal documents. I found old papers and jewelry. I searched through

several boxes stored under her bed that were stuffed full of handbags, shoes, notebooks, and more jewelry. Her jewelry was all heavy and dark, metallic, with studs and silver skulls. I found myself wondering about Rosa's aesthetic, her personal style. I leafed through a notebook, where she had written a list of activities, such as yoga and photography. I wondered whether this was a list of her passions, of things that made her happy. I felt uneasy because writing similar lists had helped me in difficult moments. Like in Hasan's house, the closer Rosa's tragedy felt to me personally, the more uncomfortable I felt. Most decedents were much older than me; Rosa was closer to my age. It was easier to mentally separate myself from decedents' deaths when their lives had been so unlike mine. And even though Rosa was obviously different – she was German, a fashion photographer, and so on – the fact that she was a younger woman made her fate already feel uncomfortably close. Like Hasan, she was apparently successful and wealthy; from a superficial standpoint, there was nothing for her to be unhappy about. With Hasan, I speculated about the treatment he might have sought before his suicide. With Rosa, I looked for clues to the reasons behind her suicide. If I knew something specific had happened to her, then I would feel somehow safer.

Taking a deep breath, I lifted myself off the carpeted bedroom floor and walked out into the kitchen. There was a makeshift office space in the kitchen, closed off by a Japanese screen. This was where Rosa kept her professional materials. I found a portfolio of glossy, black-and-white fashion photographs. Her models wore heavy eyeliner, slicked back hair, and black leather. In another box, I found stacks of business cards and promotional postcards. I wondered if Rosa was having professional problems. Could this have led to her suicide?

I felt increasingly uncomfortable around Camila. Though we were ordered by the court to be there, I sensed that we were violating her family's privacy by being witness to the

aftermath of her sister's suicide. She seemed equally puzzled and embarrassed. In front of Rosa's closet, she asked me and Maria if we wanted any of her sister's clothes. I was not sure what to say. An important rule of investigations was to take nothing for ourselves, yet here was the decedent's sister, offering us her belongings. The PA was supposed fill in the absence of close relations, serve as a last resort – not be present as a woman wrangled with her sister's death. Maria broke the uncomfortable silence by politely declining Camila's offer. I felt that this was the most awkward moment of our visit.

As strange as her offer felt, Camila seemed sad and confused, and I understood why she wanted her sister's things taken care of and distributed as soon as possible. She offered the two of us clothes because she saw us as two young woman who might wear them. She would, somehow, need to collect or distribute all these belongings while visiting the United States. We had to decline the offer because we were not there as young women but as representatives of the PA. It was against our ethical and procedural code to take the clothes. But even as a young woman, witnessing the scene in that apartment made Rosa's death feel fresh and devastating, and this made the idea of walking away with her clothes feel wrong and strange.

Elsewhere I discovered a large packet of medical records that were hard to decipher. Perhaps Rosa had been seriously physically ill, and this had led her to alcoholism. None of us asked Camila, we only speculated about what happened.

Maria helped Camila recover a few items for the funeral. They pulled out two stunning floor-length lace dresses and two pairs of strappy, high heeled sandals. Before we left, Camila hung the dresses up against the living room wall and placed the shoes on the

floor below. She would bury her sister in one of these outfits. She took a step back, looking at them.

"Which one do you think?" she asked Maria.

"They are both lovely," Maria said. "Take both and decide later."

"Ok, thank you so much."

"Let me just take a quick picture." Maria used the office phone to take a photo of the dresses and shoes. As on any other investigation, we had to record everything taken from the decedent's home.

"Ok done." Maria nodded at Camila.

Meanwhile, Paul quietly combed through the house. It was difficult to find the passport. It was Paul who finally found it, hidden deep inside a kitchen drawer, after half an hour of searching. I felt that Paul, more than anyone else at the PA's office, had a highly developed second sense about where to find things.

Paul obviously respected Camila, an elegant European woman mourning her younger sister, but he lacked the ability to express empathy. This was well-balanced by Maria, who talked to Camila and actively reassured her. Once Paul found Rosa's passport, he soberly handed it over to Camila. She thanked him profusely. She was now able to send her sister's body to Germany, to be buried near their parents.

Afterwards, I tried to reconcile my cynicism in the lobby with the sadness, pity, and fear I felt in Rosa's apartment. While the building was ostentatious, the lives that it housed were complex. Rosa's living space had humanized her. I felt ashamed of judging the residents of this luxury building as if, living in such extravagance, they could not struggle, experience depression, and deserve the same sympathy I willingly gave to others. The PA's work made

these struggles visible and, as with Hasan, confused my association between money and a well-contented life.

While I may have experienced these feelings in Camila's absence, her presence made them especially palpable. Unlike the investigation in Philip's apartment, Camila had not entered the apartment mid-search, and so we did not experience that awkward transition from investigating alone to being in the company of loved ones. Camila searched for the passport with us and seemed pleased with how her sister's things were treated. Still, Maria and I both felt uncomfortable in her presence. We all knew that Rosa had committed suicide, but no one said it out loud. The discomfort of this difficult, unspoken knowledge ran like a quiet current through the investigation. Rather than this discomfort emerging from the encounter between our investigative style and her presence – from the clash between the bureaucratic and personal – it came from other factors: from Rosa's own discomfort with her sister's tragic death and from the simple fact of our presence. We saw Rosa's reactions and we saw what her sister had done to herself. The presence of an other – in other words, Maria, Paul, and I – heightened the uncomfortable buzz of the atmosphere.

And in Rosa's case, as with Hasan's, her death was disturbing from the beginning. A suicide, unlike a "good" death of old age like Mr. Crosby's, cast an investigation in a different light: it was, from the start, already a bit more serious. Rosa's investigation was not approached with curiosity or humor; neither was it approached in a completely impersonal manner. Even Paul, who insisted on maintaining an efficient, bureaucratic, impersonal style in the field at all times, expressed feelings of care and pity for Camila. It was the specific situation – a tragic death and Camila's presence – that created the emotional landscape of our investigation that day.

Paul and Maria exemplified the best of the PA's work. Paul did much of the searching, in a quiet, unobtrusive way. Maria acted as an emotional support to Camila, who was obviously confused and disturbed by her situation. During this investigation and others, Paul usually worked according to an efficient, passionless bureaucratic ideal – he maximized his emotional distance from his work, and this was what distinguished him as an employee. This made him a good, fast investigator. On the other hand, he did not engage in much conversation with people in the field who may have experienced loss and could have used some emotional support. Maria, therefore, was a perfect partner for Paul. She tolerated his social anxiety with good humor and demonstrated empathy when he could not.

Pablo expressed outward joy in certain kinds of objects and interactions with people, frequently kept things light, and allowed investigations to pass quickly. Paul approached investigations differently, in a systematic way, showing little to no outward emotion. Maybe, considering Pablo's long leave of absence, Paul's was the most sustainable approach to the PA's difficult work. Perhaps, in the end, maintaining strict distance from the emotional valence of the work was how Paul kept going and going, with only two weeks' vacation for his yearly trip to the Dominican Republic.

When we left Rosa's building that day, Paul told the two of us that he was glad we had helped Camila, who was a nice woman in a difficult situation. Though he was not able to express this kind of care in Camila's presence, I was pleasantly surprised by Paul's emotional satisfaction with his work. He also told us he was grateful that we came along because he recognized that we put Camila at ease.

Paul had showed more warmth and care than he usually did, and though I was disturbed by Rosa's home, it was not as bleak as Hasan's and I did not feel that same sense of despair. There may have been specific reasons for both of our different emotional states, but our emotions and attitudes could also change by the day or the week. Like anyone, sometimes we had good days and sometimes we had bad days, and this was reflected in our work. Sometimes our attitudes and behavior were simply contingent on a myriad of unspecified factors.

Ana

Ana's death was personal, and disorienting to everyone. There was no disconnect between me and my coworkers; we all faced the reality of loss together. Even though we cared about decedents enough to remember many of their stories and to construct expansive informal narratives, all these investigations really happened at a distance from true, personal loss. This one was different. When we went to Ana's mother's house, and Pablo tried to answer her in the style of a Public Administrator employee, it was so patently inappropriate. The bureaucratic agency answer – however much it was couched in caring sentiment – failed completely in the face of something so personal. Its ineffectiveness was exposed, and the wall that we put up between ourselves and the decedents was torn down. And Mohammed suddenly started to cry.

Ana died suddenly in early January. It was the dead of winter. She had been hired only two months earlier. She was strangely maternal for someone in her mid-twenties. I had a bad cold one week and she told me to go home, rest, and drink hot water with lemon and ginger. Her death was, of course, something that I could not have predicted or

planned for when I began my research. It was a bizarre thing, a disorienting thing when someone we knew passed away and it was not one of the decedents whose deaths were not personal to us. It was someone in the office who worked on estates every day.

Maria received a call from Brookhaven Medical Center that morning asking for Ana's next of kin information. She was confused and thought that Ana was handling a case out of Brookhaven. The office often received cases from this hospital, which operated in a low-income neighborhood. Maria asked for the name of the decedent and the date of death. The woman on the phone clarified: "No, we need next of kin information for Ms. Ana M. We found an ID from your office on her body." Maria started to cry. "On her body" could only mean one thing. But it was inconceivable that Ana could be dead.

Three weeks later, on the way back to the office from an investigation, Pablo, Mohammed, and I went to Ana's house, where she lived with her mother and sister, to drop off the belongings she had left in the office. In our bag we had a photo of Ana with her best friend; a photo of Ana at her graduation from John Jay College of Criminal Justice; a poster of proverbs from the Bible; a water bottle, a coffee mug; and a sweater that she kept at her desk. Her mother, dressed in a house coat and slippers, sorted through the bag, placing each item onto her dining room table. She told us that she had given her daughter the Bible poster before her first day of work. Just before she passed, Ana was complaining about pain in her leg but she refused to see a doctor. The pain worsened but she still would not go. Two days later, on her way to work, the blood clot that was causing pain in Ana's leg traveled up to her heart and killed her.

Mohammed began crying quietly. He offered to visit Ana's mother in the future. It was just her, her older daughter, and their tenant left in the house these days. Her husband had passed away five years earlier, and this experience had motivated Ana to find work at the Public Administrator's office. She wanted to bring some comfort to other people who had lost their loved ones. Ana's mother patted Mohammed on the shoulder, thanking him for the offer. Later, in the car on the way back, Mohammed said that his tears came suddenly without warning.

Before we left the house, Pablo gave Ana's mother her last paycheck. He explained to her that there was a complicated procedure for getting this check cashed. Because she was Ana's mother she could apply for and quickly receive letters of administration, which she needed to legally cash the paycheck. Pablo told her that she could call the Public Administrator's office if she had any questions since this is what the office specialized in. This required her to travel to the downtown courthouse, which was far from her home.

Ana's mother walked with a cane and she said it wasn't so easy for her to get around. There was a strange moment of confusion because the paycheck came from the PA's office where Ana had worked, and yet the PA was now offering help in its capacity as a government agency that served New York City residents. The personal was veering into the institutional. Eventually it became clear that what Ana's mother should actually do, since she and Ana had a joint checking account, was to just deposit the check herself. This was not legally correct, but in her situation, it was the easiest way. I could see Pablo hesitate before he confirmed that this unofficial work-around made the most sense.

Ana's death stopped the process of estate administration in its tracks. We were not administering her estate but still tried to use our PA practices to help out. We all felt comfortable using agency language and logic most of the time. But this time, our standard way of dealing with a death was suddenly exposed as an inappropriate bureaucratic logic. We saw the PA's way of work, suddenly, from the other side – from the side of those who had suffered a loss. This is why, when Pablo began to dispense advice to Ana's mom, it did not work. He had to stop being a PA employee and instead just be a friend. And when Maria answered the phone in the office in the standard way, asking for the decedent's name and date of death, the sudden realization that this was not that kind of call immediately shocked her – and everyone else in the office – straight out of our routine.

There were hints of this kind of disorientation during certain decedent investigations. In Philip Crosby's house, I felt uncomfortable when Mr. Crosby's girlfriend watched us search his apartment. Because Mr. Crosby had no will, she was unable to inherit much of his property, and this also struck me as unfair. At the time, Pablo and Mohammed said they agreed with me, but it did not bother them as much as it bothered me. I got pulled out of the PA's mindset more than they because I was only tangentially a PA employee – I was, primarily, an anthropologist, and could come and go from the office as I pleased.

Other disorienting moments occurred. Maria and I both felt uncomfortable when we entered Rosa's apartment with her sister Camila. Even Paul, who was usually unemotional in the field, thanked us for being there as emotional support to Camila. The strangest moment of Rosa's investigation came when Camila tried to give away her

sister's clothes to me and Maria. It was against our standard procedures at the PA, which dictated that nothing could be taken from decedents' homes. What were we supposed to say when the decedent's closest relative actually offered her property to us? It exposed the fabricated nature of our position as agency representatives. We were not there as young women who might wear these clothes; our characteristics as individual people had been erased by our jobs. We were agency personnel, there to conduct and supervise certain legal procedures. The fact that Camila tried to communicate with us as young women, threw us off, momentarily, from the task at hand.

And then there was Hasan's case, which had its own challenges that were personal to me. Our first investigation began, like Mr. Crosby's, as an opportunity to explore cultural artifacts with my coworkers – stamps in Mr. Crosby's case and Pakistani devotional music in Hasan's case. By the second investigation, however, the disturbing facts of Hasan's death began to sink in. In Hasan's house, I felt deeply sad and disturbed by his suicide. The emptiness of his home seemed to drive home viscerally what must have been deep emptiness and desolation in his life. My coworkers and the property bidders, however, did not seem particularly bothered. Usually, investigations in homes did not disturb me, even when the details of the decedent's death were difficult. I attribute my feelings and disconnect with my coworkers to my being burned out from too many investigations; my coworkers doubtless suffered similarly but their thresholds were higher or the triggers in this case different. While my coworkers and I got used to being around death constantly – it was "a job," the deaths were not personal, and the sheer volume of cases lessened their emotional impact – these seemingly random moments of breakage nevertheless occurred, and often in invisible ways. This is especially evident

from Pablo's long leave of absence from the PA's office, which was precipitated by a mental health crisis during an investigation.

These stories have to do with the balance that PA workers strike between care and distance. I characterize my colleagues' attitude in the field as "limited caring." I argue that my colleagues have to limit how much they care about decedents, because otherwise the emotional load of the PA's work becomes unmanageable. Despite the distance PA workers put between themselves and the decedents – and some of my colleagues put more distance than others – they engage with decedents' stories, show sympathy in the field, and construct expansive informal narratives about decedents.

But as much as PA workers show their care, the disorienting personal moments that I examine in this chapter demonstrate that the agency's logic and practices placed us, always, at a distance from personal loss. This is not a criticism of bureaucracy. It is realistic reflection on the innate challenges of bureaucratic work that is done in an intimate sphere.

Chapter 5 | Cecil

It was rare to meet more than a few acquaintances or a single family member of the PA's decedents. Many, if not most, decedents died with few social connections – or at least, this is how it appeared to us, in the limited sphere that we investigated. The smallness of their social worlds felt sad. Of course, my coworkers and I could only guess if a decedent had actually been sad or lonely; all we could do was read the signs second-hand.

There was a general, agreed-upon sense among my colleagues, however, that something must have gone terribly wrong for anyone whose estate ended up in the PA's hands. Given the choice, no one should want their estate primarily handled by the state; it was inherently undesirable for a stranger to search through and sell off one's personal effects. Every PA case, then, was tragic in *some* way.

But *was* every PA case tragic in some way? Cecil's case was different. Cecil had lived an extraordinary life, full of music, art, and friends. He had countless social connections. He had lived a long life, active until almost the very end. Cecil was famous. Unlike most other decedents, you could easily watch films of him, listen to his music, listen to him talk about his art. During the course of my research into his estate, which I mostly conducted apart from my PA colleagues, I met many people who had known Cecil and could tell me stories about him. Cecil was by no means socially isolated.

Even though I had never met Cecil, I felt a particular connection to him. There were several reasons for this. First, I had listened to his music. Second, by coincidence, I knew several people who had known him. And third, unlike my PA colleagues, I had the luxury of time. I could take the time to attend Cecil's memorial and talk to his friends.

How did Cecil's radically different case force me to reconsider everything about the PA's work? How did his case make me reconsider how to best to honor someone's legacy after they die?

Part 1

Cecil Taylor's memorial concert began at 6:30 and ended after midnight. A large group of teenagers gathered onstage first, playing instruments and reciting poetry in unison. A screen behind the performers displayed photos of Cecil all night long. The right side of the auditorium was filled with musicians who played throughout the evening. During and between performances, the musicians, friends of Cecil's, gossiped, laughed, and walked around saying hi to each other. As the concert went on, they got rowdier and yelled at their friends onstage:

"Yeah! Wooohoooo!"

"Go, hippie girl, go!"

Squeezed in between the musicians, who had welcomed me into their space, I laughed, smiling at the people around me, and tuned in when I heard anyone say something about Cecil.

A poet took the stage and gave a speech. He had first heard Cecil play music downtown in Greenwich Village in the early 1960s. Decades later, the two had become friends:

"Though I worshipped him he allowed me to be his equal as he did with so many others and boy did he love to talk and drink and dance and do so many freedom-filled things. I still find it hard to believe that we became so close. We shared so many informative,

jovial, maniacal and at times, downright silly conversations, about virtually everything…He never ever compromised his art, his soul, his, at times, precarious way of living. He'd try anything and always lived life to the fullest and on his own terms."

A group of Cecil's contemporaries, elderly musicians, followed the poet, playing the loose and wild music that their friend was known for. Later in the night, an ensemble of musicians and dancers made their way through the aisles of the auditorium, swaying, beating drums, and singing. They all gathered onstage, getting louder and louder – when they finished the audience whooped and erupted in applause. Behind the auditorium, in the lobby, large groups gathered, buying beer from the makeshift bar and chatting. I witnessed reunions and laughter all around me. Cecil's memorial welcomed me into a large, joyful social world. Well after the memorial I continued to encounter many people whose lives had been touched by his.

I had been to other memorials before, in my personal life, but Cecil was a very particular kind of person: a PA decedent. Did I ever consider calling any other deceased person in my personal life a "decedent" before? No, even though this word quickly became second nature during my fieldwork. It is a strange word – it does not work in regular conversation with regular people. So even beginning with the basic language my coworkers and I used, it already implied a legal category, already showed that my colleagues and I considered this group of individuals in a particular way, in the eyes of a particular kind of law. Even in an individual's home, on an investigation, no matter how many times we visited and how attached we became to the case, the deceased was always

called a decedent. But in the context of the memorial, it became difficult for me to call Cecil a decedent because he was being remembered and celebrated in a way that was so different from the way that the PA dealt with an estate. I was also opening up the scope of my own investigation, in a way I did not for many others.

This sense of alienation from the PA's methods and assumptions brought up questions about the ethics of honoring the dead. I confront these questions periodically through the course of this chapter. If you take the PA's work for granted, take its way of doing things as second nature, there is little opportunity to question things. But because Cecil's estate was different in so many ways, it became harder to take the PA's work for granted, or rather, to assume their procedure was the only way.

And finally, Cecil's case came to the PA's office at the very end of my fieldwork, once I had, technically, "returned from the field." How does leaving the field change your relationship to the world in which you were once immersed?

Driving to Cecil's house

Cecil Taylor, a Black native New Yorker who grew up in middle-class Corona, Queens, passed away in April, but the Public Administrator was not appointed to his estate until early October. Like some other PA decedents, Cecil had had a guardian, an attorney appointed to take care of his finances and legal matters when, two years before his death, he was deemed an incapacitated person. This attorney had been trying to appoint one of Cecil's only two remaining relatives, both first cousins once removed (the most distant relation qualified to inherit under New York's intestate succession law), as the administrator of his estate. My coworkers and I knew this would not work. It was

already next to impossible to appoint a first cousin– there was no way an even more distant relative could qualify. The fact that the guardian did not know this seemed to reflect poorly on him, although we knew other attorneys who had done the same. It also meant that Cecil's estate, which included an entire Brooklyn brownstone, lay dormant for months. This was similar to Annette's case in chapter one, when her large Victorian home was legally "frozen" for three years because her cousins had also unsuccessfully tried to appoint a friend as estate administrator.

Pablo, Mohammed and I set out on our investigation early in the morning. We first had to pick up Cecil's keys from his guardian, whose office was located in midtown Manhattan. Traveling up the FDR Drive, Pablo told us that the guardian had accused the Public Administrator's attorney of unfairly taking Cecil's estate away from him.

"That's ridiculous," I said as I rolled my eyes. Of course, the guardian wanted to keep the case – it would guarantee him a hefty commission.

"I hope he doesn't put up a fight today," Pablo responded.

Pablo and Mohammed went up to the guardian's office together while I sat in the car and waited for them, nervously hoping the cops would not ask me to move the car, which Pablo had left double parked in the middle of Midtown Manhattan. He often left me sitting in the car like this, feeling mildly annoyed, waiting while they ran around doing errands.

After a short time, Pablo and Mohammed returned with Cecil's keys, some of his mail, and a binder of legal documents. The guardian had been surprisingly pleasant, they said. He told them that Cecil had a large piano in his house that was worth a lot. He also said that a woman in Switzerland who falsely claimed she was Cecil's daughter had

unsuccessfully sued him, the guardian, for mishandling the estate, and that this experience had been exhausting. The guardian told Pablo and Mohammed, "Good luck. It's *your* responsibility now."

During the drive, I kept trying to convince Pablo and Mohammed that Cecil was famous and *important*. I somehow felt morally obligated to do so. I assumed that without my intervention, they would not grasp Cecil's importance as an artist, and not treat his stuff and his estate with the respect that it deserved. This was not just about establishing how much Cecil's stuff was worth and making sure that valuable things were not tossed away, but also about respecting him as a person. I felt that without my intervention my coworkers might think of Cecil only as a victim or a poor old man to be pitied. Ironic that in so many other cases, that was exactly how I thought of the decedents we investigated: as victims, if not of others than of a cruel society, and to be pitied for their unfortunate ends at the Public Administrator's Office. I often thought, and still sometimes think, of that pity as an ethical position. By experiencing pity, I felt that I was acknowledging the decedents' end of life pain, thus actively avoiding the temptation of bureaucratic indifference. With Cecil, however, it seemed to me that the same pity I believed was ethically important in these other estates amounted, essentially, to an insult. To pity Cecil was not to acknowledge him as a full human being. It was to see him as a two-dimensional character.

In the car, I rattled off facts to Pablo and Mohammed: "Did you know he won a MacArthur Genius Award?" I shoved my phone in front of Mohammed's face in the front passenger seat, forcing him to watch a YouTube video of Cecil playing solo piano. "Isn't that amazing?" I insisted. "There are *many* videos like this online." I told them how my

musician friends idolized Cecil, how they thought of him as their hero. I also insisted that Cecil had happily played music and partied until he was quite old (to what extent this was true I would not know until later). All the while, I had the sneaking feeling that I was being pushy and patronizing. My coworkers had done hundreds of investigations of all kinds and knew what they were doing. Why, apart from the major financial value of Cecil's estate, did I feel that he ought to be treated differently? Did I believe that some estates ought to be treated with more attention and enthusiasm than others? Did a life in the public eye require a more substantial kind of remembrance?

I arrived early to the memorial and stood outside the venue in the stand-by line. Tickets had sold out online and it was cold out. I spoke with two older men standing with me – a fan of Cecil's who lived in New York and a composer from Philadelphia who came for the memorial. The composer had seen Cecil play several times, once in an almost-empty jazz club at two in the morning. Another man, behind me in line, jumped into the conversation. He was a guitarist who had played with Cecil. He introduced us to a saxophonist smoking a cigarette outside who would play that night. Cecil and the saxophonist had formed an orchestra together that performed for many years.

I told my new acquaintances that I had never met Cecil or seen him play live, but I felt close to him because I had been to his home. I explained the role of the Public Administrator's office and told them that Cecil's estate had ended up there. They were more familiar with his music than I was; two of the men had even played with Cecil. At the same time, I felt that I had a unique intimacy with Cecil that these men had never experienced, and that I could only have established in Cecil's absence: I had explored

every part of his house, gone through his clothes, his books, his papers, and his records. I had found a stack of porn magazines, hidden atop a tall bookcase, wrapped in brown paper and tied up with twine. I looked through his kitchen and bathroom cabinets. I looked through his dresser full of socks, undershirts, and underwear. This was the kind of intimacy usually only known by a family member or a close partner, who shared your space and your stuff.

They were surprised to hear that I had been to Cecil's home and that his estate was being dealt with by a government office rather than a close friend or family. They were also shocked that Cecil had died eight months earlier and all his stuff was still sitting in his house. I thought to myself how strange it was that Cecil had been idolized and celebrated by so many people – including these men – and yet his legal personhood and legacy had ended up in the place of last resort, the Public Administrator's office. With such fans and abundant friends and colleagues, shouldn't the house and the things that existed intimately together with Cecil already be taken care of? Why was there such a disconnect between how Cecil was received publicly and his post-mortem existence before the law? Ultimately, it was the law that would determine where his stuff went – and nobody but myself and a few others who never even met him were the given the power to enact that law.

Had others attempted to care for Cecil's estate, and failed? Had the state stepped in *unfairly*, or had his friends simply not been there to take care of his stuff? In other words, who had created this regrettable situation? Did it result from *a lack of care from others* or from a *legal system* that, in the absence of a will, *only favored close kin* and

traditional family structures? As I stood there in line, talking about Cecil and awaiting the memorial, I began to think about these questions.

Looking across the street from the memorial venue, I noticed a large Single Room Occupancy building I had visited with the PA called the Regency. I had gone there once on an investigation into the estate of a man who passed away with no assets apart from what could be found in his single room. The building, originally a hotel built in the 1930s for working-class men, now housed the formerly homeless. I had been to many unfortunate SROs with the PA, but this one was particularly bad. The shared kitchenette, which had a microwave, sink, and hot plate, looked like it had not been cleaned in months.

During that investigation, I searched the decedent's room wearing my mask and rubber gloves, digging into a pile of clothes that emerged from the open closet, trying to find something useful to the estate – an ID, cash, or maybe an insurance card. A mouse suddenly jumped out at me and I screamed. My coworkers, looking over, started to laugh. It was time to wrap up the investigation, they decided; we were not going to find the money necessary to bury this man. Instead, his body would go to the "Potter's Field," a longtime burial ground for the City's indigent.

Contrast this with what I encountered at the memorial for Cecil, who, before he died, set aside $10,000 dollars for flowers for his funeral. And yet, despite making arrangements for an extravagant floral display, Cecil had not left a will. This put him in the same legal category as the man in the SRO, who had barely one hundred dollars to his name.

At Cecil's house

Cecil lived in a brownstone in a neighborhood near downtown Brooklyn. He had bought the house in the early 1980s, long before the area became trendy and property values skyrocketed.

His house was one of those perfect Brooklyn brownstones with a big stoop on a leafy residential street. It was a particularly cold October day when we first visited his house, and Pablo, Mohammed and I were delighted to find that his heat was still working.

We searched the first floor as the radiator hissed loudly. Some junk mail was laid out on the table by the front door. The large front parlor had a small couch, a coffee table, boxes of CDs, and several large paintings stacked up against the wall, covered with a large, heavy cloth. Were these painted by Cecil? A poster promoting Cecil's 2001 concert with the drummer Max Roach was propped up on top of the fireplace mantle. Through the parlor there was a big, sparse kitchen. An empty laundry line hung from one corner of the room to the other.

From the parlor, we made our way down to the garden level. There was an empty hallway with three doors – two were open and one was locked. The guardian had given us the key to a locked room in the basement. We opened this door first, expecting to find some treasures, but there was nearly nothing in there, just a few knickknacks and a couple of old cameras. We explored the other two rooms, also coming up with nothing. Wandering into the vestibule attached to the basement entrance, I found a dirty scrap of paper with a part of a typed letter to Cecil. Had someone thrown this under Cecil's door? I picked it up, smoothed it out, and left it on an empty desk in one of the bare rooms.

Without context the letter made little sense, but I was happy to find some small sign of Cecil's presence in the otherwise austere basement space.

I continued poking around downstairs hoping to find something else interesting. Failing to do so, I ran back up the stairs and joined Pablo and Mohammed on the second floor. The floor-through carpeted room served Cecil as an office, living room, dressing room, and space for entertaining. It was decorated top to bottom with photos, African cloths and artifacts, newspaper and magazine clippings, and framed portraits of Cecil by different artists. In the very back was a clean, well-organized kitchen. In the front was a large armoire filled with clothes.

Pablo pulled out a colorful sequined jacket and put it on while he looked at himself in the mirror.

"No, don't put that on!" Mohammed chided Pablo.

"Looks pretty good, huh?" Pablo remarked, admiring himself. "Take a picture of me!"

I looked over. "Amazing jacket," I said.

"Okay," Mohammed said. "I'll take a picture. But then take it off!"

"Fine," Pablo relented. Mohammed pulled out the office's cellphone and took a photo of Pablo. Cecil had some hats in the armoire and we took turns putting them on. The idea of putting anything else of Cecil's on my body felt *off* to me – even though I knew it would have no consequences. The items we sorted through during investigations were often very personal, but we only held them, put them back, or tossed them away with our gloved hands. To engage with these items in any more substantial way felt taboo. Though Pablo was more willing to cross that line, none of us usually tried on

clothing. Cecil was a famous musician and, for Pablo, trying on his flashy performance clothes was an unusual opportunity – a little like wearing one of Liberace's capes.

The third floor was also warm and lived-in and full of stuff. Cecil had similarly collaged the walls with photos and magazine clippings. His small bed sat in the corner of the giant room, neatly made and covered with a patterned fabric. A full grand piano sat only steps away from his bed. I walked around its long, curved body and sat down at the keyboard. The enamel on the middle six or seven keys had come off completely. Later I learned that Cecil had been banned from many clubs in New York City for breaking pianos (Dalachinsky 2018).



I played a few notes while I looked up at Pablo and Mohammed, who continued to search for valuables or personal IDs and documents but were coming up empty-handed.

"What's over there?" I asked them.

"Not much!" Pablo responded.

"Just books!" Mohammed said.

"Come look at this photo," Pablo called me over. "Is she famous?"

I got up from the piano and walked over to him. Cecil was middle-aged in the picture and stood next to a tall, attractive woman. "I have no idea," I said honestly.

When you conduct an investigation, there is a sense that you'll know it when you see it. The investigators have no professional, specialized knowledge about antiques or jewelry but they have developed a casual know-how. Pablo and Mohammed felt that they had found nothing good in Cecil's house. They wanted to find original music scores, an enormous record collection, paintings, and autographed jazz memorabilia. We found very few of these things. There was a record collection, but it was not big. There were some large, unsigned paintings on the first floor. It later occurred to me, judging from my occasional conversations about music with Pablo and Mohammed, that if we had found something of great value signed by a famous musician, neither investigator was probably equipped to recognize it, and I was barely more equipped than they were.

While the second and third floors of the house were full of stuff, Pablo, Mohammed and I suspected that things were missing. Why, for instance, had that room been locked in the basement, if there was nothing there? We barely found any scores or

manuscripts in the house. There was a filing cabinet on the second floor with two drawers, one labeled "music" and the other "poetry." Both were empty.

Someone had surely been there and taken things. But who? Washing my hands in the third-floor bathroom, I saw a Starbucks cup in the trash. Downstairs, I saw another used coffee cup. Both looked new. Were these signs of an intruder?

Pablo, Mohammed, and I suspected the guardian. He had kept Cecil's estate hostage for months. He was rude to the PA's attorney and had already shown incompetence as an estate lawyer. There had been a reverse mortgage taken out on Cecil's house, while he was under guardianship, and the property was approaching foreclosure. How could a guardian, appointed to protect an individual's well-being, allow all these things to occur? And how could he allow Cecil to die without a will? The three of us felt that something unsavory was going on.

All that Pablo brought back to the office that day was a signed baseball that I found on Cecil's bookshelf. I picked up the baseball thinking it might be autographed by a major league team, but on closer inspection, I saw that it was signed by Cecil's masterclass students at NYU. I told Pablo that the ball was probably not worth anything, but he insisted we take it. Maybe Cecil had also signed it? Maybe his signature was worth something? Maybe one of his students was famous? I said okay. It was not worth arguing. It seemed to me that Pablo just wanted to bring back *something* from the investigation, and the actual value of that item was irrelevant. All that mattered was that a signed baseball was an object, like a watch or autographed headshot, that was *known to be valuable*.

What is the right way to honor someone after they die? Should one take care of the material stuff they left behind? Or should one attend to something more intangible by honoring their memory and legacy through art and language? In other words, did it matter that Cecil's stuff sat in his house for eight months and then was searched through and picked over by us, strangers sent by the State? That even before we arrived, someone had taken his poetry manuscripts and sheet music and likely other valuables? Weren't Cecil's memorial and legacy what really mattered? It seemed to me that these questions came down to determining what defined a person, and thus what parts of their legacy ought to be honored and respected. Was a person defined by the stuff in their home? This is certainly what the PA's work of narrative-making asserted. Or was Cecil defined by the music he produced and people he influenced? Perhaps all these things – the home, the stuff, the music, the intangibles – came together to make Cecil who he was, and in an ideal world, all these aspects of his personhood would be treated after his death with the utmost care.

A month after that first investigation, I met Mohammed for an early dinner, before he left for a trip to visit his family in Pakistan. He and Pablo had gone back to the house the week earlier with a friend of Cecil's. The friend confirmed that many valuable things were missing from the house. He had visited shortly before Cecil passed. But he was not surprised that stuff had gone missing. Cecil liked to invite people over and stay up for days doing cocaine. Some of these visitors took advantage of Cecil's generosity and compromised state.

I shook my head. It was sad that some of Cecil's friends might have ransacked his house. But this story also demonstrated that Cecil had lived his 89 years to the fullest. "Is that the secret to long life?" I asked Mohammed. "Going on cocaine binges?"

We looked at each other and laughed.

A few weeks later, Cecil was a favorite topic of conversation at the annual office holiday luncheon. Maria told us that she mentioned his name to a pianist friend of hers back in Albania, where she was from. He knew Cecil's music and was impressed that Maria was working on his estate. A few people talked about how Cecil's things were going to a museum. I had been away from the office for some time, and in my absence Cecil had obviously been discussed frequently among the investigators and case managers. At the beginning and middle of my fieldwork, when I was spending more time in the office, I often participated in those kinds of conversations, yelled between desks, about certain estates. They were work-related but they also felt like gossip, sometimes. Now the patched-together details of Cecil's life were the conversational glue keeping these coworkers together. It was fun and uplifting to learn about a man who enjoyed his life and lived an *interesting* life. And Cecil's fame was a novelty for me and my coworkers. It was as if his fame rubbed off on us, just a little bit.

Over the next several months, I would continue encountering friends and acquaintances who had stories about Cecil. One night I talked to my musician friend Lenny at 55 Bar, a club in Greenwich Village.

"That's where Cecil would hold court," Lenny told me, pointing to the end of the bar. "Every night. Cecil was one of my idols. He was one of the few people I always wanted to play with."

"Did you ever play with him?" I asked.

"No," Lenny shook his head. "But I gave him rides in my old Cadillac, around to different bars.

"I think his piano and a few other things from the house will be going to the Smithsonian," I told him.

"His whole house should be in the Smithsonian," Lenny said.

Connor, a musician I met through a mutual friend, met Cecil years ago at Jazz at Lincoln Center. Connor was employed at the time as an audience wrangler: he stood outside the elevators before and after performances, making sure that audience members walked in the right direction. Cecil played one night with a bassist named Henry, a well-known musician who had disappeared from the public eye in the 1970s, only to resurface decades later, working as a school janitor in California. Their performance was strange for Lincoln Center — Cecil played the piano and pirouetted across the stage while Henry, forgoing his double bass, played the violin. More than half of the audience walked out before it was over. Connor took pleasure in seeing the buttoned-up Lincoln Center regulars get freaked out by these old musicians. Taking his spot by the elevators, Connor watched as Cecil, smoking a joint, left the theater. "Great show," Connor said. "Thanks, darling," Cecil responded, as the elevator doors closed.

"My friend Katie just inherited Cecil's books," Connor told me.

"Really?" I said, trying to hide my surprise. There were many books in Cecil's house only a month earlier, when I visited with Pablo and Mohammed. I supposed there could have originally been more.

"She was walking down Avenue A, and this guy who sells books next to Tompkins Square Park stops and asks her if she wants all of Cecil's books. He knew that Katie and Cecil were close, and she's into literature. Yesterday she posted about it on Facebook. And she invited me over to look at the books."

By pure chance I was discovering who took Cecil's stuff.

"How did Katie know Cecil?" I asked.

"Katie's been a bartender in the East Village *forever*. She and Cecil partied together *all the time*. They were really close. You know, they were pretty bad influences on each other," Connor reflected.

So Cecil's good friend, a bartender, had many of his books now, which some guy on Avenue A had in his possession and could not sell or did not want to sell. The way I figured it, Cecil's friends *should* inherit his books. Who was I to report this back to the Public Administrator, the "lawful" distributor of his property, or to meddle in the affairs of Cecil's friends?

I ran into the poet from the memorial, Steve, a few months later at a different event. Steve recalled certain things he did not talk about at the memorial. For instance, Steve stopped doing drugs decades earlier, but would make an exception to do cocaine with Cecil. I told Steve that I had been to Cecil's house to do an investigation. He was surprised to hear that Cecil's house was clean – the place was usually a mess, he said.

Someone must have tidied up after Cecil died. I also told him about the stuff missing from the house. Steve told me he heard "the Feds" had taken stuff from Cecil's basement. Maybe, he said, "the Feds" meant someone from the State? I told him that, if whomever had taken the stuff said they were "from the State," they were misrepresenting themselves. The only state entity involved with Cecil's case had been the Public Administrator, and I knew what the Public Administrator had taken (a single signed baseball!).

But how much should it matter that stuff was missing anyway? And whose fault was it that the stuff was gone? Steve told me: "It's Cecil's fault for leaving it all in the hands of others or just not caring which I fully understand." Was it sad that Cecil's books were being given to his former bartender by some guy on Avenue A? Was it all Cecil's fault? Or was it the state's fault for not having adequate protections? When, years earlier, the half a million dollars Cecil got with the "Kyoto Prize," an extremely prestigious arts prize in Japan, was stolen by a contractor who had worked on his house, Cecil was interviewed by the Associated Press, who reported that: "Taylor did not want to talk about the case during his time in court, instead musing on the quality of trees on the train ride between Tokyo and Kyoto, the Kabuki dancers he had once seen in a Balanchine ballet, and the conductor Pierre Boulez" (Adams 2014). Cecil did not seem to care much that he had been swindled. I am speculating here, of course.

"When Cecil got paid, no one gave him his paycheck directly, because he didn't know how to handle money," Angelo, a friend of Cecil's that I met at the memorial, told me. "There are so many stories about uncashed paychecks. I heard he kept money *in his piano*."

In fact, I had heard the same story secondhand from Mohammed – that 15,000 dollars in cash was found in Cecil's piano by his piano tuner.

If Cecil's attitude towards money was this unusual, then perhaps the apparent money mismanagement towards the end of his life had nothing to do with an incompetent guardian, or Cecil's "incapacitation" or mental decline. Maybe this was business as usual. Maybe Cecil just did not care enough to plan for his property and his money after his death, and this would be completely consistent with what I had learned about his character. If Cecil had enough foresight to plan for ten thousand dollars' worth of flowers at his funeral, then couldn't he have drafted a will if he'd wanted to?

If Cecil did not care what happened to his stuff, this undermined everything the PA assumed about protecting a decedent's legacy. According to the PA, as I argue in chapter three, a decedent was defined by the things they owned of market value. In the absence of close family, material possessions helped the PA construct the decedent's narrative. A decedent's identity and legacy were the sum of their material possessions. According to this logic, the act of destroying, losing, or stealing a decedent's possessions was the ultimate ethical wrong. Material possessions had to be protected at all costs; this is why a case like Mary Roland's was so devastating to the PA.

What if a decedent did not care what happened to their possessions? What if a decedent, throughout his life, did not keep his money secure (kept cash in his piano, did not cash his checks)? What if he spent profligately on cocaine, for himself and his friends? What if this was not a sign of incapacitation or of pathological behavior? Everything I learned about Cecil turned the PA's logic, and the logic of American inheritance, upside down.

What would the decedent have wanted? Did we approach cases with a single, standard idea of what people wanted once they died? What was this standard idea, and is it correct to assume that everyone would want the same thing?

The kind of narrative I usually felt was "enough" for other decedents – I did not think was "enough" for Cecil. And the kind of pity I cultivated as an ethical position for other decedents, I felt was patronizing in Cecil's case.

Cecil's case was different because many of the things I thought were very helpful in other cases were not in Cecil's case. What do I mean by this? For other decedents, we, as the PA, had a limited collection of things and stories from which to construct our narratives. This goes for both formal *and* the larger, informal narratives. So even though the scope of our informal narratives could be relatively large, containing all manner of things and stories that would not ever make it into the formal narrative, this "ethnographic technique" was not comprehensive enough for Cecil.

After more than four hours of music, poetry, and dance at Cecil's memorial, the evening ended with a short film of Cecil as an elderly man, playing the same piano I had seen in his home. Sunlight streamed through the windows as he slowly played note by note. A man in a loose white shirt and pants danced expressively to the music. Cecil looked up at him and smiled. They both looked blissful.

In my years of research at the PA's office, going on countless investigations, this was the first time I had ever seen a decedent alive in their own home.

Part 2

Soon after I went on that first investigation with Pablo and Mohammed, I wrapped up my fieldwork at the PA's office. I had already done almost two years of full-time research at the PA's office and it was time to officially "return from the field." This was not so straightforward since I lived in New York City, my fieldsite. But the fall semester had started, I was commuting to Princeton regularly, and did not have much time to visit the PA's office.

One day I met Bill for lunch and found out that a museum curator was spending time in Cecil's house, under PA supervision, picking out items for a potential exhibit about Cecil. Pablo was still overseeing the case. I reached out to Pablo to ask him if I could come along. I wanted to meet the curator and find out what kinds of items he was interested in, and what he imagined for the exhibit. Pablo told me I was always welcome to join them. The next week I went to the office and caught up with coworkers I hadn't seen in more than a month. I was welcomed warmly by some and ignored by others; this reflected my general experience at the office. Around mid-morning, Pablo, Mohammed, and I – the crew I knew well and was most comfortable with – headed out into the field.

The office had a new car. The old car had been littered with tissue boxes, empty envelopes, and old jugs of the hand sanitizer that we used after investigations. I admired the new car's clean interior as we drove the short way to Cecil's house. I was happy they had finally acquired something new and nice. I told Pablo and Mohammed about teaching Princeton undergrads. I showed them pictures of my new apartment. Mohammed told me about his wedding in Lahore and showed me pictures of his wife. He was waiting for her US visa to arrive. Pablo's son was still doing well in school. At the office, Pablo said,

things were the same. On top of their investigations and office work, the two of them also went to Cecil's house one day a week to supervise the curator, Adam, and his helpers. Adam could not be in Cecil's house without them. Everything he packed up had to be seen and documented by the PA.

Once we were in the house, Adam and his helper worked by themselves on the first floor while Pablo and Mohammed did inventory on the second. Adam and his helped were not being actively surveilled – not that there seemed to be any risk of theft. I sensed a divide between the two groups – even their conversations seemed clipped and awkward. Upon arriving, Pablo and Mohammed settled into the second floor, which was filled with boxes of books that Adam had put together. Pablo showed me the desk where he sat down to do inventory every week. He demonstrated how he went through the books, noting down, by hand, each title, author, type of item (book or magazine), and corresponding box. The work was slow and boring. I helped out.

The inventory sheets were designed poorly and it was difficult to squeeze long book titles into the corresponding box. I inventoried one book, then another, and then another. I wondered why many of these books were being taken for an art exhibit, or even a curated library. Some exhibit catalogues and biographies seemed relevant, perhaps, to tracing Cecil's development as an artist, but others did not. I also wondered why Pablo and Mohammed were making extra work for themselves by writing everything down by hand onto these inconvenient forms. I suggested to Pablo that perhaps the inventory could be recorded on a computer. Pablo responded that the office did not have laptops and was not willing to acquire them so that was not an option. Still, I insisted, there had to be an easier way. If it were me, I said, I would bring my own laptop. Mohammed and Pablo

looked at me, laughing and shaking their heads. They would never bring their own computers to the field. What if something happened and their laptops were stolen? I frowned. They were only going to Cecil's house, I said. It was not dangerous there. No one would steal their stuff. Pablo and Mohammed continued shaking their heads and laughing. I began to feel frustrated, even angry. I took a deep breath and tried to let the feeling pass. I had been gone from the office for a long time and, even though as an anthropologist I had never been a total insider, I was feeling more like an outsider than ever.

I knew I had to stop arguing with Pablo and Mohammed; it was not my place and it was not productive. So I went downstairs to talk to Adam. He and his helper were sorting through CDs on the first floor. As I turned the corner, Adam looked up at me. I introduced myself again. I explained that I had been an intern and researcher at the PA's office for years but was now wrapping up my research and beginning to write. I told him about my university affiliation, and that I was interested in writing a dissertation chapter about Cecil. I thought that these details might encourage Adam to be more open with me about his project. Perhaps identifying myself as an academic might align my work with his as a curator.

Adam remained quiet. I told him where I suspected some of Cecil's belongings had disappeared. Adam nodded. He did not seem surprised or interested. I could not tell if he was wary of me in particular, or whether he acted this way in front of anyone he met for the first time. Was he suspicious of me because I was affiliated with the PA? I wondered what he thought of the PA's work on Cecil's case. He was, in a way, collaborating with the PA, but their communication was minimal. Upstairs, I had asked

Pablo why certain books were being taken for the exhibit (cheap romance novels, for instance); he had no clue. Couldn't Adam, Pablo, and Mohammed fashion a more efficient system by collaborating?

I became even more frustrated. I went outside and sat on the stoop. My new distance from the PA had turned me into an irritable fieldworker. I no longer took the PA's procedures and style for granted. I could not go with the flow; I wanted to fix everything. And trying to find a sympathetic outsider in Adam had also failed.

I thought about my first few weeks doing fieldwork at the PA. Perhaps now, having spent time away from the office, my initial impulse to fix things, so strong at the beginning, had returned. But this time I also knew how complicated things could be. I knew which inefficiencies were unavoidable and I could better identify the problems. Not that it mattered anyway. It was not my job to fix anything. As much as, in the moment, I wanted to.

My resistance also had something to do with Cecil's case in particular. Even from the beginning, I had tried to "teach" Pablo and Mohammed about Cecil's cultural importance. Despite my position as both a PA insider and outsider, I felt that, for the most part, I experienced PA cases more as an employee than a fieldworker. I felt differently about Cecil's case because of my personal connection with his music. As I dug further into Cecil's life and talked to people who knew him, that connection grew stronger. At the same time, I was finishing up fieldwork. It was the convergence of those two circumstances – my connection to Cecil and my transition out of fieldwork – that left me doubly alienated from the PA.

In many ways, Cecil's case was different for Pablo and Mohammed, too. No other estate had ever required them to leave the office for weekly inventory work. At first, Cecil's estate had been an exciting novelty for them. I could see on that day, however, that the inventory work had become a nuisance that Pablo and Mohammed resented. It was made worse by the lack of heat in the house; by this time, the boiler had been turned off to save money. They had to do repetitive, boring inventory work *and* they were cold.

Mohammed walked outside to grab more inventory sheets from the car and saw me on the stoop.

"I'm sorry, I had to get out of there," I told him.

"That's okay, you know what we're doing. Nothing exciting to see!" Mohammed smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know why I got so annoyed. I've been gone for a long time and I'm not used to it anymore. I don't mean to push you and Pablo around. I'm sorry."

Mohammed nodded. "No worries, I understand."

I followed him back inside. Adam and his helper continued their work without looking up. We went upstairs. Mohammed and Pablo continued their inventory while I glanced through Cecil's books. I apologized to Pablo for my mood and he assured me it was no big deal.

I walked upstairs to the third floor. The piano was in the same spot as last time, next to Cecil's bed. I sat down at the piano again, striking its keys one by one. Cecil's bookshelves and desks had all been emptied. Instruments were piled into boxes that were lined with towels for padding.

Cecil's house, like his estate, his legacy, and his personhood, was in transition. His things were being moved into another space where, hopefully, he would be honored in some way. Despite my frustration, I was glad to see Cecil's belongings moved to an archive curated by people he knew rather than sold to the highest bidder.

Mohammed came upstairs to tell me we were leaving. We had barely spent an hour in the house; it hardly seemed worth it, to schlep all the way there and set up just to leave so soon after. Adam had to leave too, since he could only work while the PA was present. I ran down to the second floor and found Pablo packing up his things. It was time for lunch, he said, and after that he had other work to do in the office.

We all filed out of Cecil's house and Pablo locked the front door. The four of them – Pablo, Mohammed, Adam, and his helper – made plans for the next week while I stood on the curb and waited. I thought to myself, this was the last time I would go to the field for a while.

Conclusion | *And yet…*

Fully developed bureaucracy operates in a special "sine ira ac studio" ["without bias or favor"]. Its peculiar character and with it its appropriateness for capitalism is the more fully actualized the more bureaucracy depersonalizes itself, i.e., the more completely it succeeds in achieving that condition which is acclaimed as its peculiar virtue, viz., the exclusion of love, hatred, and every purely personal, especially irrational and incalculable, feeling from the execution of official tasks. In the place of the old-type ruler who is moved by sympathy, favor, grace, and gratitude, modern culture requires for its sustaining external apparatus the emotionally detached, and hence rigorously "professional," expert; and the more complicated and the more specialized it is, the more it needs him. All these elements are provided by the bureaucratic structure. Bureaucracy provides the administration of justice with a foundation for the realization of a conceptually systematized rational body of law. (Weber 1954: 351)

My PA colleagues were not "emotionally detached" bureaucrats. They experienced "love," "hatred," "irrational and incalculable" feelings. Because *people have emotions*. In this sense, my argument against falling for the common stereotype of bureaucratic indifference is pretty obvious. *Of course* my colleagues cared – to some extent. And of course being around all that death, the blood stains, the empty houses, the houses that were completely, disturbingly bare, and the houses that were stuffed to the brim with things, of course all of that had an impact on them, and on me, emotionally. There were inevitable points of breakage in their state of "limited caring." So does the

fact that these emotions existed – that it wasn't all bureaucratic indifference – does this, somehow, recuperate the "morality" of bureaucratic work? The answer is, in a sense: yes.

And yet. The PA's work could feel strange. It felt, at times, awkward, wrong. Caught mid-search by the grieving girlfriend of the decedent; present while a woman wrangled with her sister's suicide; telling Ana's mother how to deal with her daughter's bank account through official channels. These were moments when my own discomfort – and, sometimes, the discomfort of my colleagues – suddenly came into view, or emerged. This is the emotional pattern that I want to talk about here – a kind of see-sawing between the two sides, between two truths, of the PA's work. The PA's work was ethical, it was moral, it was personal, it was not "antinarrative" – *and yet.* There was something off, there was something immoral, there was something unethical and unfair, and it refused to go away. What do we make of this?

In my argument against the stereotype of the indifferent bureaucrat, I do not argue with ethnographers who find that state care is not only immoral but murderous in a variety of ethnographic contexts; it may well be in those and other situations. But the choices that anthropologists make, to focus largely on the murderousness of the state or of state bureaucracy, needs to be examined and further discussed. I suggest that it is important to do ethnographies of bureaucracies not only while observing from the outside, but also while immersed within the bureaucracy and embedded with the bureaucrats themselves. I have already made this point above, but it bears repeating because I believe that switching viewing positions could have real world consequences. Abusive and dysfunctional state systems ought to, of course, be revealed and reviled for what they are and they should be changed accordingly. But effectively changing these

systems will require understanding the people who work for these state systems and comprehending why they work the way they do. Observation from the outside certainly reveals much, but it can also deceive. You could walk into a room where Pablo and Mohammed and I are looking through a decedent's stuff and righteously condemn us for throwing things about, for rummaging through a stranger's private things, a stranger who might have been a private person and would not have wanted anyone looking through their stuff. I completely understand why this work, and our techniques in the field, might look bad or immoral, and they felt bad and immoral sometimes to us, too. But then read Chapter 4, and see Pablo and Mohammed and myself *all* having moments and even extended periods of emotional and mental breakage from the toll of the PA's work. I have tried to show that it's not that I or we did not care. If we could have somehow been those emotionless bureaucrats that seem to populate many discussions and if we could have completely depersonalized the work – something that Paul strove for but did not always achieve – could we would have better protected ourselves as persons? Would such an attitude or stance been a more effective tool of self-preservation than our "limited caring"? But this is, of course, an unrealistic question, essentially a stupid question because neither I nor my colleagues had such a choice. They could not choose between being bureaucratic automatons *or* living people with emotions. Because, as much as I hate to make a broad or seemingly universal statement, we are all emotionally affected by the things we do, especially when we are around death and especially when we must deal with the grieving.

There is another, connected point to make here. Keeping my colleagues' work personal – thus guaranteeing the "morality" of the PA's work – had a number of real and

complicated consequences *for them*. First, keeping the work personal kept us engaged. When all the work was kept at a distance, when all of it stayed impersonal, it simply became far less interesting, boring – the work became a daily drag. But second, keeping the work personal had a real emotional impact on my colleagues that could be harmful, at times.

Critiques of bureaucratic domination and indifference focus on how the clients are treated and how they are affected. The question of whether bureaucracy is an ethical enterprise depends on how its practices impact its clients. But why don't we ask a different question: is bureaucracy an ethical enterprise for the bureaucrats themselves? This may seem, at first, like an inappropriate question, because usually the power dynamic of the bureaucrat and client is one of inequality, with the bureaucrat in a position of authority, of domination, and the client in the lower position, the subordinate position. In this situation it would be right to prioritize the ethical impact of the work on the client. But in the PA's office – as with other street-level bureaucracies – the bureaucrats, my colleagues, frequently were in the subordinate position (Lipsky 2010). They were low level employees, poorly paid, frequently dealing with the estates of people far wealthier than they. And no matter how incredibly large the estate they worked on, no matter how extravagant the decedent's home, how many valuable possessions, no matter how many millions in their investment accounts, my PA colleagues were paid the same low, disappointing salaries, had the same grey cubicles in the dirty, dusty basement of the Surrogate's Court building, and were rarely afforded respect by the public. This is not to say that they had no authority. They had the power to go to homes, search everything, collect valuables, and investigate and sort through decedents' accounts and private

information. But that is, essentially, where their authority stopped. And so I feel that the ethics of the work my colleagues did, in terms of whether it was ethical *for them* need also to be discussed. Again, I am not putting aside the question of whether the work was ethical for the clients, but rather suggesting that *both* be considered, together.

Is it right to expose my colleagues to all those deaths, to make them deal with intimate and sometimes disturbing cases over and over again, and ask them to perservere and get a little emotional but not too emotional? Maybe that work, by its nature, is not sustainable? This becomes a question of the whole setup of the PA's work, of its role in general. It is a question of what bureaucracies are asked to deal with, and how.

What emotional impact does bureaucratic work have on the bureaucrats? Why does Weber leave that question out? To function properly, Weber claims, bureaucratic work must be unemotional, "standardized," "professional." What happens when bureaucrats try to perform that role as he suggests?

My colleagues' hearts bled, *and yet.* Cecil's case demonstrated just how bizarre the PA's ethics could be. Weber writes that "fully developed bureaucracy" is the perfect vehicle for capitalism. The PA – or, rather, the Surrogate's Court, and the State in general – weighed lives in terms of their valuable possessions. A person's identity, after death, is defined by how many things they owned. Identity is linked directly to material accumulation – it is capitalist in the sense that the more accumulated the better. But Cecil's case really turns this logic upside down. If the American system of estate law is based on a kind of capitalist common-sense, then Cecil was anti-common sense. Common sense would suggest that $10,000 in cash ought to be put in a bank account to keep money safe and so it can accrue interest. But Cecil kept his $10,000 in his piano.

This neither kept the money safe nor allowed it to accrue interest. Actually in both life and death Cecil appeared to be anti-common sense, which is why the logic of the PA's Final Accounting did not work for him, at all. What about any or all of the others? Did the capitalist logic of the more valuable stuff a person had the more of a person they were – did this logic, say, make sense for the *average* decedent? Remember that Dukeminier's estate law textbook – discussed in the conclusion to the introduction – says that the rules of intestate succession are designed to satisfy the majority. So, would the majority of people agree with this capitalist logic? Does this arrangement make sense for the majority of people, the majority of decedents? And another question arises: is satisfying the majority the best we can hope for in our legal system? Why, exactly, should the majority rule when the process of estate administration is about putting individuals, with very different stories, to rest?

Although as I have discussed, I have tried to resist the temptation until now, seizing the opportunity offered by reaching the very end of this thesis, I want to think about how the PA's work could be better. This may seem a very predictable move, to suggest ways that a government bureaucracy can improve its practices. I almost groan as I see myself write that sentence. But that's where this dissertation is going.

The conclusion I reach, however, is that there is no satisfying, certainly no simple and satisfying answer. I have no simple answer to how the PA's work can be better for both the PA workers and for the public – because it is important to think about how simultaneously it can be better for both parties. What I can do is write – as I have tried to do here – about what worked, and what did not work. I can keep asking questions. I can keep saying – the PA workers had emotions, they were not indifferent, they took care

with their work in the limited way they could – *and yet.* And yet my PA colleagues could be emotionally disturbed by their work *and* they could be terribly bored with the endless barrage of deaths every single day. It's not as if the state of "limited caring" they developed through the course of their work was the best way to go through their work—but it seemed to work, kind of?

And yet – is the work of the Public Administrator the best way to administrate estates? What is the right way to lay these decedents to rest?

I would like to suggest that this attitude – "*and yet"*— could, perhaps, characterize a fruitful approach to the study of bureaucracy as a complex field. What would this *and yet* approach entail, exactly? It would mean looking at a bureaucratic fieldsite from one perspective, and then asking, what if this is different from what it seems? What if the morality and the immorality coexist? It would mean always tempering our claims with an "*and yet.*" In essence, it is about being open to, and feeling, the other side of the argument. And looking not for complete solutions, but rather, looking for improvements by asking questions that have no clear answer, but that signal an ethical awareness, a desire to improve the practice of bureaucracy for bureaucrats and clients alike.

Appendix A

A Technical Overview

The Public Administrator's role and legal position are complicated. I spent a long time working in the office's many positions before I understood either in any substance. It is ironic that I spent my first summer responding to an external audit of the PA's office, determining which recommendations were appropriate, when it was only much later that I actually understood what these recommendations would mean for the office, and whether they were feasible. Bill told me that it took him ages to understand the PA's work in depth. He supervised all aspects of the office: from everyday management to legal issues and real estate closings. But this was something that he liked about the work – that there were always new rules and practices to learn, both explicit and implicit. PA employees had to know the written guidelines *and* the many unwritten rules and practices that were developed over years of estate cases.

In my conference papers, I often include a long technical preamble about the Public Administrator before getting to the substance of my argument. Few people, even in New York City, know that the PA's office exists, although its work could potentially affect any person at any time. Every time I present a paper, therefore, I need to explain some basic information about the office and the legal/bureaucratic process of estate administration. I often worry, since there is so much to explain, that these preambles will eat up my limited presentation time.

This is my preamble, without regard to time limitations. I explain the PA's position and some of its practices by surveying its written laws and guidelines. I use these written documents to organize the structure of this section, at the same time incorporating related practices that are unwritten but equally or more important to the work in practice.

While conducting fieldwork, I was not familiar with some of what I discuss here. For instance, how the PA's powers are officially established never came up in practice. It is only after completing fieldwork and reviewing all the legal handbooks and official guidelines I accumulated that I learned some of what I include in this section. Reviewing this material illuminates some of the office's structural difficulties.

The PA's Position Within New York's Court System

The Public Administrator's powers are granted in the Surrogate's Court Procedure Act ("SCPA"), one of eight Court Acts under the Laws of New York State. The PA of each county is appointed and overseen by the Surrogate's Court of that county (NY Estate Administration).

The Surrogate Court's powers were first granted in the New York State (NYS) Constitution in 1962. Before that year, the Surrogate's Court had more limited powers that were granted by statute (NYEA). In the current version of the NYS Constitution, revised in 2018, the Surrogate's Court is given:

> "jurisdiction over all actions and relating to <u>the affairs of decedents, probate of wills, administration of estates</u> and actions and proceedings arising thereunder or pertaining thereto, guardianship of the property of minors, and such other actions

and proceedings, not within the exclusive jurisdiction of the supreme court, as may be provided by law." (NYSC)

The work of the Surrogate's Court, in summary, relates to decedents' estates and the guardianship of minors as well as incapacitated persons. The Court handles cases in which a party cannot represent itself, therefore requiring a "surrogate" to stand in. For the Public Administrator, the Court's most important role, as indicated by my emphasis, is its jurisdiction over the affairs of decedents and the administration of estates.

Each county in New York State has a Surrogate's Court served by one or two judges that are publicly elected to lengthy terms. In New York City, judges serve fourteen-year terms (NYSC). Each county has one Surrogate judge, except for New York County and Kings County (Manhattan and Brooklyn), which each have two (SCPA). In Kings County, where the elected judges are invariably Democrats, candidates are selected by local party members. As a result, the race for the Surrogate Court's judgeship is essentially decided by local Democratic party politics rather than by public election.

The Public Administrators of the five counties in New York City – New York, Kings, Bronx, Queens, and Richmond (Staten Island) – are granted their powers by Article 11 of the Surrogate's Court Procedure Act. The remaining counties of New York State are governed by Article 12, which grants powers to the Public Administrators and, in certain cases, the Chief Financial Officers of those counties. In sparsely populated areas of the state, the Chief Financial Officer performs duties that would otherwise be performed by a Public Administrator. I focus here on regulations governing the work of the Public Administrators in New York City.

The Public Administrator is an individual appointed by the judges of the Surrogate's Court. Only the judges of the Surrogate's Court may appoint or remove the Public Administrator (SCPA). The PA is a New York State Commissioner required to take an oath of office and post bond upon their appointment. In addition, the SCPA creates the role of Deputy Public Administrator, who is also appointed by the judges of the Surrogate's Court. Though the Surrogate's Court and, by extension, the PA, are granted their powers by New York State, the PA, their Deputy, and employees are paid from the budget of the City of New York. In addition to the PA and their deputy, the Court appoints legal counsels to the Public Administrator. These counsels provide legal services to the estates handled by the PA. Although they are meant serve the PA's interests, these counsels are directly supervised by the Surrogate's Court judges, not by the PA. Each judge appoints their own counsels – meaning that attorneys only work for one judge, and not the other. Counsels to the Public Administrator are, unlike PA employees, not paid out of the budget of the City of New York but are rather paid from the estates for which they provide legal services. The amount of money counsels make follows a sliding scale based on the size of an estate. The bigger the estate, the more money they make. Not so, however, for the PA's employees, who make the same salary regardless of the size of the cases they work on. These differences in supervision and pay can create conflicts of interest between the PA and his or her counsels. I witnessed many such conflicts during my fieldwork. These conflicts prevented some estates from being expeditiously administered and created animosity in the office.

In New York County and Kings County, the Surrogate's Court consists of two judges that are separately elected in different years. The two judges split the workload of

the Surrogate's Court. Each judge has their own staff. In addition, each judge appoints their own counsels to the PA, who serve only that judge's cases. In Kings County, one judge handles estates with dates of death on odd-numbered days and the other dates of death on even-numbered days. This system is meant to ensure that the judges' cases are evenly split. With different staffs, cases, and their own counsels, the judges' work is fairly separate. The PA develops a unique relationship with each judge. At the same time, however, the PA is supervised by the two judges in tandem. The PA must have a separate relationship with each judge while also answering to the two as a single supervisory unit. How this arrangement works in practice depends upon the PA's relationship with each judge as well as the judges' relationships with each other. During my fieldwork, there was frequent tension between the two Surrogate's Court judges. The PA's office had to carefully navigate this tension. On one occasion, one judge even accused the other of unfairly taking larger estates, although the distribution of estates was done on a completely random basis. Even bureaucratic offices administrating the estates of the dead are not above this kind of petty squabbling. Above the two judges, the PA answers to the governor of the State of New York. There is, therefore, a large gap in the supervisory hierarchy. This is a problem because, above the Surrogate's Court judges, there is no readily available supervisor to which the Public Administrator can appeal. If the PA has issues with the judges, they must appeal to their union or take another legal recourse to deal with any problems. Well after I completed my research, the PA successfully took legal action against one of the judges, who was suspended.

While the Surrogate's Court Procedure Act establishes and broadly outlines the PA's powers in Article 11, it also creates an Administrative Board to provide more

specific guidelines to the PA. Specifically, Article 11, Section 28 of the SCPA establishes an "Administrative Board for the Offices of the Public Administrator." The SCPA dictates the makeup of this Administrative Board, which must consist of thirteen members, of whom five are Surrogate's Court judges. The remaining eight members are selected by the chief administrative judge of the State of New York, the president of the New York State Bar association, the State Comptroller, the Attorney General, and the president of the New York State Surrogates' Association. Some members must be residents of the city of New York and some must reside outside the city.

The first version of the abovementioned guidelines, "Guidelines for the Operations of the Public Administrators' Offices in New York State," was approved in November 1995. Amendments to these guidelines followed in 2002 and 2008. The most recent version of these guidelines, which I discuss here, was approved in 2012 (hereinafter "the Guidelines"). I reviewed the Guidelines several times during my fieldwork, both for my own reference and also at Bill's request when responding to audits. Though not regularly reviewed by PA employees, the Guidelines did play a role in the management of the PA's office. The Guidelines, for instance, were frequently referenced during Bill's semi-monthly meetings with a committee of external consultants appointed to supervise the management of the office while it emerged from its troubled history. In these meetings, consultants compared data on the everyday work of the office to the standards detailed in the Guidelines.

The Guidelines apply to all the Public Administrators in New York State, both in and outside of New York City. They cover a large variety of offices both large and small,

serving vastly different populations across the state. Consequently, the Guidelines are both broad and specific in their scope.

The Guidelines consist of the following sections: Office Procedures and Record Keeping; Administrative Functions; Cash Management; Property Management; and Compensation and Selection of Outside Vendors. In the following, I summarize some sections of the Guidelines and discuss how these written rules play out in the PA's daily work.

Office Procedures and Record Keeping

Each PA must establish internal controls for the proper performance of estate work. This directive is quite broad, essentially requiring that each PA's office establish their own controls in order to prevent employee fraud. Each office has a different sized staff so the ability to segregate work duties varies from county to county.

The Guidelines require a plan for the "collection and custody" of estate assets, as well as the "reconciliation of estate accounts." The Kings County PA has its own guide to internal controls that is updated regularly in response to annual audits and incidents of fraud. For instance, until recently all credit and debit cards recovered during investigations were kept in estate case folders. Following a major incident of theft by a PA employee, all credit and debit cards in these folders were destroyed and a new, more secure system for recovering bank cards was developed.

Each PA must have an electronic case management system. This system keeps track of estates being administered by the PA ("estates" are also referred to as "cases"). The guidelines require the case management system to have certain features. These

include a tracking system to ensure that no cases experience unusual delays; an inventory of real estate and personal property; and an accounting system to track deposits into and disbursements from each estate account. In practice, these requirements are satisfied by several separate management systems.

The primary case management system ("CMS") is accessed through a shared computer interface. The CMS is where estate work begins and constantly returns. When an estate is referred to the PA's office, its details, including the decedent's name, their date of death, and a unique case number are entered into the system. Once this information is entered, any employee in the office may log onto the system and view the details of that case. Over time, each estate's page in the system comes to include other identifying information: the decedent's residence at death; the estate's EIN number for tax purposes; the estate's account balance, including a ledger of deposits and disbursements; and any notes to keep track of case activity. This is the electronic command center for each case. Once a case is closed, it is indicated in the system. There is a limit to how many people can access the management system at one time. During busy times in the office, you can hear employees yelling across cubicles, asking others to close out of the system so that they can have access.

The "tracking system" or "ticker" to ensure the speedy administration of estates has been notoriously difficult to implement. The time it takes to administer and close a case varies widely. It is difficult set any kind of standard timeline. While resolving cases in a timely fashion is always a good idea, estates are different, legally complex, and change frequently, making this aspect of the guidelines particularly problematic. This is

often a point of conflict and misunderstanding between management and external supervisors or auditors.

Inventories of decedent real estate and personal property are kept separately. The office maintains a spreadsheet of PA-managed real estate, including information such as the dates of expiry on insurance policies. Another much larger spreadsheet contains the inventory of decedents' personal property. This inventory includes every item held in the office's vault and in its offsite storage unit. The items are recovered from various places: decedents' homes; decedents' storage vaults; and personal property recovered from the bodies of decedents by first responders, usually the police department. When items are auctioned off or claimed by family members, the inventory list is updated. Because investigations happen almost daily, and a few items are usually recovered during investigations, the inventory changes frequently.

Finally, the accounting system to track deposits and disbursements exists in different forms. The first is the simplified accounting system accessible through the CMS. This system is used as a reference by case managers and others. The office's bookkeepers, on the other hand, maintain a separate accounting system only accessible to them, the PA, and their deputy. This accounting system is kept separately from the office's other employees as a form of internal control and fraud prevention.

Systems mandated by the guidelines are designed not only for the efficient performance of office work but also for the prevention of fraud. The guidelines dictate that access to the case management system must be secured by limiting user access and through other measures. The guidelines and the PA's mandated audits are geared towards preventing wrongdoing rather than facilitating work.

The guidelines require the PA to maintain an estate file, also known as a case folder, for each decedent. This folder contains the papers accumulated during the process of estate administration: "correspondence, financial statements, investigator's reports, police vouchers, appraisals, [and] insurance documents," to name a few (Guidelines, 2). PA employees constantly return to this physical folder. The CMS is an estate's *electronic* home while the case folder is its *physical* home. At the PA's office, estate files are kept in a series of big rolling bookshelves in their own separate room. Open cases are stored in the front and recently closed cases are stored in the back. During my fieldwork, I spent countless hours in this room. I filed, among other things, legal papers, correspondence, and investigation reports. Whenever I wanted to know more about a case, I would go pull out its folder. Many estates were small because the decedent owned no real estate and had little money. These case folders were thin, holding only a few papers. Other estates were huge and filled several overstuffed folders, all lined up next to each other on the bookshelf, bursting at the seams. Case managers would accumulate a lot of case-related papers, which frequently left them with giant stacks of paper that needed filing. From time to time they had to stop what they were doing and devote an entire day or two to filing papers. I would often help with this menial but necessary work.

While filing could be dull, especially when faced with large stacks of papers, lingering over case folders could be interesting. Each estate is memorialized in bits and pieces in its case folder. There are email exchanges referring the case over to the PA's office. There are emails setting up the investigation. The folder contains investigation reports, and non-valuables recovered during the investigation. You might find birthday cards with addresses of potential family members; an old work ID with a photo of the

decedent; a college diploma; or a few photos with notes sketched on the back. The simple case folder contains a whole life.

The guidelines discuss the proper use of the PA's suspense account. This account consists of money accumulated from the PA's one percent commission on the final value of decedents' estates. The suspense account is primarily used for two purposes: to pay office expenses and to pay estate expenses in cases when an estate's assets have not yet been fully collected. The guidelines dictate that all such uses of the suspense account be fully documented. Suspense account monies are not part of the PA's annual budget. Because these monies are a kind of bonus, extra care must be taken to regulate their use.

Finally, the PA's office must undergo an annual audit conducted by an independent auditing firm. This requirement is mentioned in the SCPA but is further detailed in the Guidelines. Auditors are directed to, among other things, review a random sample of estates both large and small, proportionate to the actual variety of PA estates, and review and test the office procedures outlined in the guidelines. The PA's office has fared poorly on most of its audits. While low marks do sometimes indicate areas for improvement, they also reveal how difficult it is to evaluate the PA's work.

Appendix B

Estate Administration and its Cast of Characters: A Guide

The Case Referral

The PA first receives a case referral. Cases are referred to the PA from many different sources. A common source is the Medical Examiner's Office, when the decedent's body is unclaimed. Referrals come with some – usually quite limited – information about a decedent.

The Office Manager

The office manager distributes all the cases that are referred to the PA to case manager-investigator teams, except for nursing home cases.

The Investigator

When a case is referred to the Public Administrator's office, the office manager assigns the estate to an investigator and case manager. The investigator does most of the initial work, including any field investigations. The investigator takes the referral and begins reaching out to anybody mentioned in the initial estate information. These might include family members, close friends, neighbors, building owners or managers, and supers. Eventually, after reaching out to these individuals by phone or through email, investigators then set up a field investigation in the decedents' home. Sometimes there is no contact information in the initial referral, or whoever is listed on the referral does not respond to initial inquiries. In those cases, investigators may first set up a "drive-by,"

during which they travel to any addresses listed for the decedent and see if they can find any information. Sometimes, the investigator will visit a decedent's friend's or relative's home in order to gather information. Once the field investigation is completed, the investigator writes up a report. If the initial investigation has not yielded much, then one or more follow-up investigations must be conducted, and for each follow-up trip, another report must be written. In addition to writing reports, the investigator takes photos during investigations. These photographs are meant to prevent fraud.

The Investigation Report

Each time an investigation is done, the investigator must fill out an investigation report. This report is an account of the investigation done that day; its form varies between a list and a narrative. There are always a number of details at the very top of the report form: decedent name and case number, investigation personnel, date, and so on. An example of a typical investigation report can be found in Figure 1.

The Case Manager

While it is the investigator's job to make contacts and collect all the relevant information on a decedent, their family, and their assets, it is the case manager's job to follow up on that information. The case manager's work takes much longer than the investigator's work.

The Case File

The case file contains all papers collected about the decedent, including any emails, investigation reports, relevant legal documents, and personal papers such as death certificates, bank statements, and IDs. On paper, the case folder is the fullest account of a decedent.

The Nursing Home Cases

All the nursing home cases are referred to one case manager who specializes in nursing homes. These estates require a different treatment than other PA estates. For nursing home cases, there is no investigation. There is usually little money in these cases. What money the decedent had is ordinarily held in an account by the nursing home. In addition, decedents in nursing homes usually have pre-needs, which are pre-paid arrangements for their funeral and burial. The PA's office therefore does not need to do much of the work that is necessary in "regular" cases: no burials need to be arranged, and no investigation needs to occur. The office opens and closes nursing home cases quickly. Because the decedent was already in a nursing home, their things are, in general, all held together at the home. And because nursing homes are very expensive, these decedents tend not to leave behind much money.

The Property Manager

The office has a property manager who keeps track of all real estate held by decedents. These properties are the most valuable thing that the PA handles. The in-office property manager keeps track of these properties, collecting rent if there are tenants, and making

sure insurance payments are up to date. In addition, the office contracts a second property manager to manage properties in the field. This second property manager is not an exclusive employee of the PA's office, and only comes in occasionally. While I was conducting fieldwork, Lucas was the field property manager. He visited the PA's properties regularly, making sure there were no squatters and that the utilities were functioning. If building repairs were needed, he would take care of them. If there was a blizzard, Lucas would shovel the sidewalk. While the PA remained in charge of decedents' real estate, Lucas would serve as their superintendent.

The Bookkeepers

The PA's office has one to three bookkeepers to manage its accounts. When I began my fieldwork there was only one bookkeeper. Later, when this longtime bookkeeper reduced his hours, another accountant was hired. This new accountant hired an intern, who became her assistant. The accountants/bookkeepers keep themselves separate from the rest of the office. Their office is locked when they are not in the office and their door is often closed when they are.

Figure 1: *Standard Investigation Report*

Public Administrator's Office

Name of Decedent	Date
Address of Decedent	Medical Examiner #
Place of Death	Date of Death
Decedent Buried?	Rental/Co-op/Condo/House/Room?
NYPD Seal on Door?	Police in Apartment before PA?

Basis for Search: PA informed by First Cousin of decedent, Ms. X, that decedent was single and lived alone and she is the nearest living next of kin. Investigators to meet with Ms. X and Managing Agent Ms. Y access to the apartment to be gained by keys vouchered by NYPD. Contents of the apartment to be released to Funeral Creditor Ms. X who paid $4,000.00 in burial expenses for her cousin. The apartment to be released to building management if applicable search for will and assets.

Next of Kin:

1. Super: Managing Agent Ms. Y 212-555-5555 and Landlord Ms. Z 718-555-5555
2. Next of Kin: First Cousin Ms. X 209-555-5555
3. Neighbor:

Investigative Steps:

1. ACRIS:
2. # of Visits:

PA Investigators visited above location and met with Ms. X First Cousin and Funeral Creditor and Ms. Y Building Management representative access to the mailbox and the apartment was gained by keys vouchered by NYPD. The decedent was a resident since April 1, 1968. The studio apartment was in very poor condition and contained property of no salable value garbage was strewn throughout the premises. The following was recovered misc. department of Veterans Affairs correspondence, misc. social security documentation, misc. banking information, NY state identification card and other photo identifications, Ancestral Burial information, copy of Lease renewal form, NY State department of Labor records, health insurance cards, Baptism certificates, US Army honorable discharge paperwork given to Ms. X to assist in moving decedents remains to a Veterans Cemetery, PA investigators also recovered misc. uncounted US Coinage sealed in S.E. #11111, $10.00 in U.S. Currency sealed in S.E. #222222, misc. unverified jewelry sealed in S.E. #333333 and 3 U.S. Treasury checks in the amounts $495.00, $112.32, and $792.00. The contents of the apartment were released to Ms. X who will return apartment back Ms. Y within 5 business days.

Apartment Released: YES

Counsel: Smith and Smith/Li and Li/Lopez and Lopez

PA Investigators: [Signatures]
Witnesses: [Signatures]
I CERTIFY THAT I HAVE WITNESSED THIS INVESTIGATION AND THAT THE ABOVE IS CORRECT
Recommendation: Reimburse Funeral Creditor First Cousin Ms. X if applicable

Supervisor Review, Date

Case Manager Review, Date
End of Report, Notes

Figure 2: *Judicial Settlement of Account Proceeding Checklist*

Judicial Settlement of Account Proceeding Checklist

(see Surrogate's Court Form JA-1, rev. 12/96)

This Checklist is provided for your convenience while completing the petition and the checklist should not be returned to the Court.

Fill in All Areas On All Pages - Also Mark When Not Applicable When Necessary
Strike Any Paragraphs/Sections Which Do Not Apply
Check All Forms To Make Sure Venue Is Correct - Appropriate County Is Listed

PET ¶ #	DESCRIPTION	YES	NO
	Does this Surrogate's Court have jurisdiction over the proceeding?		
	NOTE: If an action has been commenced in Supreme Court - proof of disposition of the matter must be provided: withdrawal, discontinuance, Supreme Court order transferring action/part of action, etc.		
	Does the caption mirror the estate file name and appointee?		
	Is the correct type of account checked? [and has the correct account form been used?]		
1.	**Is the petitioner a proper party?** [see SCPA §2208]		
	Is the petitioner ... the appointed fiduciary		
	the appointed guardian		
	the appointed trustee		
	a fiduciary of a deceased fiduciary [see SCPA §2207]		
	Is the petitioner's name, residence and mailing address listed?		
	Is the type of letters and date of issuance listed?		
	Is the amount of bond and name of surety listed, if applicable?		
	Are additional petitioner's information listed, if applicable?		
2.	**Is the decedent's name, date of death and domicile listed?**		
3.	**Are the dates which cover the account and gross sum of account listed?**		
4a.	**Has all tax information been listed?**		
4b.	**Has a tax return been filed?**		
4b.	**Was there no tax proceeding requirement for this estate?**		
	NOTE: Some courts may require a notice of appearance/waiver/consent form from the tax department (as an interested party) if a tax discharge letter is not on file.		
5.	**Has seven months passed since letters were issued?**		
	Were letters issued to the petitioner(s) revoked?		
	Has more than one year passed since a preceding account was filed?		

PET ¶ #	DESCRIPTION	YES	NO
6a.	**Are the names and mailing addresses of all interested parties listed?**		
6b.	**Are the names of any interested persons under a disability listed?**		
	NOTE: Interested parties may include but are not limited to the following: unpaid creditors or persons claiming to be creditors, surety of the bond, co-fiduciaries not joining in petition, successor fiduciary of petitioner removed or suspended, state attorney general [see EPTL §8-1.4], distributees, beneficiaries, legatees, devisees, trustees, trust beneficiaries, guardians, infants over the age of fourteen, fiduciaries of deceased beneficiaries or all distributees of deceased beneficiaries if fiduciary has not been appointed, guardian ad litems, chief fiscal officers/county treasurers.		
	NOTE: A guardian ad litem may be appointed for any person listed in the petition as a person under disability. If the person under disability appears by a guardian of the property, committee, conservator or guaridan of the property pursuant to Article 81 of the Mental Hygiene Law whom the Court finds has no adverse interest, no guardian ad litem is necessary.		
7.	**This paragraph states that there are no additional interested parties.**		
8.	**This paragraph states that there are no prior applications made in any court for the relief requested in this petition.**		
	Under WHEREFORE Clause: has all relief requested been checked and completed?		
	Has any relief not applicable been struck out?		
	Is petition dated, signed, verified, properly notarized (including proper jurat and expiration date of notary's commission)?		
	Is attorney's name, address and phone number listed?		
	Has Part 130 Certification been completed?		
	if <u>NOT</u>, has a separate attorney certification as to Part 130 signing requirements been included?		
If forms are computer generated, has a certification pursuant to Court Rules §207.4 been attached?			

ACCOUNT FORMS - SCHEDULE REQUIREMENTS			
	USE THE CORRECT ACCOUNT FORM [JA-4 or JA-7] AND MATCHING SUMMARY STATEMENT - Certain Accounts may not use all of the following schedules.		
	List proper title of matter, correct accounting type, dates for period of account; page number where each schedule starts must be listed		
A	**PRINCIPAL RECEIVED**		
	Itemized statement of all moneys and personal property constituting principal assets with their date of receipt or acquisition		

	Proceeds of sale of real property including a copy of the closing statement		
	Do not include total amount of principal assets exchanged which would incorrectly inflate gross account total (such as stocks sold to buy other stocks, bank accounts transferred to other banks or alternate types of accounts, etc. - these are reported under Schedule B (if no loss/gain) or Schedule F		
A-1	**REALIZED INCREASES**		
	Actual increases due to sales, liquidation or distribution of principal assets		
	Realized increases on new investments or exchanges		
	Detail date increase was realized and identify property from which increase was derived		
A-2	**INCOME COLLECTED**		
	Report all Interest		
	Report all Dividends		
	Report all Rents		
	Report any other income		
	Each receipt must be separately accounted for and identified except where a security has been held for an entire year, then interest or ordinary dividends may be reported on a calendar year basis		
B	**REALIZED DECREASES**		
	Full and complete statement of all realized decreases on principal assets whether due to sale, liquidation, collection or distribution, or any other reason		
	Show decreases on new investments or exchanges and also sales, liquidations or distributions that result in neither gain nor loss		
	Show date of realization of each decrease and identify property from which decrease was incurred		
	Report any asset which the fiduciary intends to abandon as worthless accompanied by a full statement of the reasons for abandoning it		
C	**FUNERAL AND ADMINISTRATION EXPENSES AND TAXES; FUNERAL AND ADMINISTRATION EXPENSES AND TAXES CHARGED TO PRINCIPAL**		
	Itemized statement of all moneys chargeable (to principal) and paid for funeral, administration and other necessary expenses, together with date and reason for each expenditure		
	Consolidate similar expenditures (funeral expenses, taxes, accountant fees, legal fees, filing fees, commissions, other)		
	Where will directs all inheritance and death taxes are to be paid out of the estate, credit for payment of the same should be taken in this schedule		

C-1	**UNPAID ADMINISTRATION EXPENSES**		
	Itemized statement of all unpaid claims for administration and other necessary expenses		
	Include a statement as to the basis of each claim		
C-2	**ADMINISTRATION EXPENSES CHARGEABLE TO INCOME**		
	Itemized statement of all moneys chargeable to income and paid for administration, maintenance and other expenses, together with date and reason for each such expenditure		
D	**CREDITOR'S CLAIMS** - ***does not apply in trustee's account***		
	List claims presented, allowed, paid and credited and appearing in the summary statement together with the date of payment		
	List claims presented and allowed but not paid		
	List claims presented but rejected and the date of and reason for such rejection		
	List contingent and possible claims		
	List personal claims requiring approval by the court pursuant to SCPA §1805		
	If estate is insolvent - preference of claims should be stated with the order of their priority		
E	**DISTRIBUTIONS OF PRINCIPAL; DISTRIBUTIONS MADE**		
	Itemized statement of all moneys paid and all property delivered (from principal) to beneficiaries, legatees, trustees, surviving spouse or distributees of the deceased, date of payment or delivery and name of the person to whom payment or delivery was actually made		
	If estate taxes were required to be apportioned and payments have been made on account of the taxes, the amounts apportioned in Schedule K against beneficiaries of the estate shall be charged against the respective individuals share		
E-1	**DISTRIBUTIONS OF INCOME**		
	Itemized statement of all moneys paid and of property delivered out of income to the beneficiaries, the date of payment or delivery and the name of the person to whom payment or delivery was made		
	Distributions of income to any one beneficiary may be reported by the calendar year		
F	**NEW INVESTMENTS, EXCHANGES AND STOCK DISTRIBUTIONS**		
	Itemized statement of all new investments with date of acquisition and cost of all property purchased		
	Itemized statement of all exchanges made, specifying dates and items received and items surrendered		

	Itemized statement of all stock dividends, stock splits, rights and warrants received, showing securities to which each relates and their allocation as between principal and income		
G	**PRINCIPAL REMAINING ON HAND; PERSONAL PROPERTY REMAINING ON HAND**		
	Itemized statement showing all property constituting principal remaining on hand		
	Statement of all uncollected receivables and property rights due the estate		
	Show date and cost of all such property acquired by purchase, exchange or transfers made or received, together with date of acquisition and cost - indicate such sums in appropriate lines of the summary schedule		
	Show all unrealized increases and decreases relating to assets on hand and report the same in the appropriate places in the summary schedule		
G-1	**INCOME REMAINING ON HAND**		
	Statement showing all undistributed income		
H	**INTERESTED PARTIES AND PROPOSED DISTRIBUTION**		
	List names of all persons/parties entitled as beneficiary, legatee, devisee, trustee, surviving spouse, distributee, unpaid creditor or otherwise to a share of the estate or fund with their post office addresses and the degree of relationship if any of each to the deceased and a statement showing the nature of the value or approximate value of the interest of each person/party		
	Enclose statement that court records have been searched for powers of attorney and assignments and encumbrances made and executed by any of the persons interested in or entitled to a share of the estate		
	Enclose a list detailing each power of attorney, assignment and incumbrance, disclosed by such search, with the date of its recording and the name and address of each attorney in fact of each assignee and of each person beneficially interested under the encumbrance referred to in the respective instruments		
	Enclose statement as to whether accounting party has any knowledge of the execution of any such power of attorney or assignment not so filed and recorded		
I	**COMPUTATION OF COMMISSIONS**		
	Compute the amount of commissions due upon this account pursuant to SCPA §2307		
	Specifically bequeathed property or very specific legacies can not be included in commission computations		

J	OTHER PERTINENT FACTS AND CASH RECONCILIATION		
	State all other pertinent facts affecting the administration of the estate and the rights of those interested therein		
	Include statement of any real property left by the decedent that it is not necessary to include as an estate asset to be accounted for, a brief description thereof, its gross value, and the amount of mortgages or liens thereon at the date of death of the deceased		
	Include a cash reconciliation in this schedule so that verification with bank statements and cash on hand may be readily made		
K	**ESTATE TAXES PAID AND ALLOCATION OF ESTATE TAXES**		
	State all estate taxes assessed and paid with respect to any property required to be included in the gross estate under the provisions of the Tax Law or under the laws of the United States		
	Include a computation setting forth the proposed allocation of taxes paid and to be paid and the amounts due the estate from each person in whose behalf a tax payment has been made, and also the proportionate amount of the tax paid by each of the named persons interested in this estate or charged against their respective interest, as provided in EPTL §2-1.8		
	Where an allocation of taxes is required, the method of computing the allocation of said taxes must be shown in this schedule		

FEE SCHEDULE		SCPA/EPTL§ or Rule #
Has the proper fee been included with the petition? Filing fee is according to the following schedule based upon the gross value of the principal (and income) - see SCPA §2402(5)		2402
0 but under 10,000	$ 45.00	
10,000 but under 20,000	75.00	
20,000 but under 50,000	215.00	
50,000 but under 100,000	280.00	
100,000 but under 250,000	420.00	
250,000 but under 500,000	625.00	
500,000 and over	1,250.00	

COMMENTS AND COURT NOTES		Form Number	SCPA/EPTL§ or Rule #
When Permitted	Whenever the interests of an estate require judicial approval of an account of the estate proceeding.		2208

COMMENTS AND COURT NOTES		Form Number	SCPA/EPTL§ or Rule #
Forms Always Required	•Petition for Judicial Settlement of Account •Trust Accounting or •Non-trust Accounting •Proposed Decree		
Forms or Documents Sometimes Required	•Copies of Will, Codicils, Trust Agreements •Receipt and Release •Waiver of Citation and Consent in Accounting •Citation •Waiver and Consent from State Attorney General •Waiver and Consent from State Tax Department •Copy of Supreme Court Orders •Affidavit of Service (Personal/Mail/Publication) •Tax Discharge of Liability Letter		

Account forms must include a summary statement and an affidavit of the accounting party.

Waivers and consents must recite fact that party received a summary statement of the account. Any party is entitled to request a complete copy of the account from the petitioner.

Make sure all waivers and consents from interested parties are on the official form including all necessary wherefore clauses from petition.

Proposed Citation must include all relief requested in petition wherefore clauses.

Proofs of Service of Citation must be filed with the Court at least two (2) working days before the return date.

Guardian Ad Litem will be appointed for interested parties under a disability. Guardian ad litem will be appointed on or before the return day of process for all unknowns and persons under disability (SCPA §403).

Documents signed by Power of Attorney - provide certified copy of POA and comply with Section 13-2.3 EPTL and 207.48 Uniform Rules.

Check to be certain all documents are properly acknowledged.

THIS MATERIAL IS PROVIDED FOR INFORMATIONAL/TRAINING PURPOSES ONLY. – It is intended for use in conjunction with review of the applicable statutes and rules of the Surrogate's Court and the Surrogate's Court Operations Manual.

Works Cited

Adams, Tim. "Jazz Pioneer Cecil Taylor Allegedly Swindled of $500,000 Kyoto Prize." *The Guardian*, 13 Aug. 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/aug/13/jazz-pioneer-cecil-taylor-allegedly-swindled-of-500000-kyoto-prize.

Alison, Jane. *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern In Narrative*. Catapult, 2019.

Ariès, Philippe. *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years.* Vintage Books, 1981.

Auyero, Javier. *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, 1981.

Bear, Laura, and Nayanika Mathur. "Introduction: Remaking the Public Good: A New Anthropology of Bureaucracy." *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2015, pp. 18-34.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project.* Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, 1999.

Bernstein, Anya and Elizabeth Mertz. "Introduction: Bureaucracy: Ethnography of the State in Everyday Life." *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, vol. 34, 2011, pp. 6-10.

Bloch, Maurice, and Jonathan Parry. *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Bolt, Maxim. "'Creature of Statute': Legal Bureaucracy and the Performance of Professionalism in Johannesburg." *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2022, pp. 419–438.

Bolt, Maxim, and Julia Schubert. "Engineering the Middle Classes: State Institutions and the Aspirations of Citizenship." *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2022, pp. 347–358.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention In Narrative*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1984.

Brooks, Peter. "Clues, Evidence, Detection: Law Stories." *Narrative*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1-27, doi: 10.1353/nar.2017.0001.

Brooks, Peter. *Seduced by Story: the Use and Abuse of Narrative*. New York: New York Review Books, 2022.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Dalachinsky, Steve. "The Storyteller." June 2018. Collection of Steve Dalachinsky.

Danforth, Loring M. *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece*. Princeton University Press, 1982.

Dawdy, Shannon Lee. "Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 51, no. 6, 2010, pp. 761-793.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. W.W. Norton and Company, 1997.

Dukeminier, Jesse, and Robert H. Sitkoff. *Wills, Trusts, and Estates*. 9th ed. Wolters Kluwer Law and Business, 2013.

Fisher, Janon. "Eight Subway Signal Equipment Maintenance Workers Charged with Fixing Logbooks and Entering Fake Inspection Data." *New York Daily News*, 10 Jan. 2019.

Frankenberg, Ronald. "Sickness as Cultural Performance: Drama, Trajectory, and Pilgrimage Root Metaphors and the Making Social of Disease." *International Journal of Health Services*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1986, pp. 603-626.

Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Oxford University Press, 1994.

Friedman, Lawrence M. *Dead Hands: A Social History of Wills, Trusts, and Inheritance Law*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

Galanter, Marc. "Justice in Many Rooms: Courts, Private Ordering, and Indigenous Law." *Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, vol. 13, no. 19, 1981, pp. 1–47.

Geertz, Clifford. "Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1957, pp. 32-54.

Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

Good, Byron. *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Gordillo, Gastón. *Rubble: The Afterlife of Destruction*. Duke University Press, 2014.

Grabham, Emily. *Brewing Legal Times: Things, Form, and the Enactment of Law*. University of Toronto Press, 2016.

Graeber, David. "Dead zones of the imagination: On violence, bureaucracy and interpretive labor." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory,* vol. 2, no. 2, 2012, pp. 105-28.

Graeber, David. *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. Melville House Publishing, 2016.

Greenhouse, Carol. *A Moment's Notice: Time Politics Across Cultures*. Cornell University Press, 1996.

Gupta, Akhil. *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India*. Duke University Press, 2012.

Hertz, Robert. *Death and the Right Hand*. Translated by Rodney and Claudia Needham, vol. 4, Cohen & West, 1960.

Herzfeld, Michael. *The social production of indifference*. University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Heyman, Josiah McC. "The Anthropology of Power-Wielding Bureaucracies." *Human Organization*, vol. 63, no. 4, 2004, pp. 487–500.

Hoag, Colin. "Assembling Partial Perspectives: Thoughts on the Anthropology of Bureaucracy." *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2008, pp. 81-94.

Hoag, Colin. "Dereliction at the South African Department of Home Affairs: Time for the Anthropology of Bureaucracy." *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2014, pp. 410–28.

Hull, Matthew S. "Documents and Bureaucracy." *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 41, 2012, pp. 251–67.

Hull, Matthew S. *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. University of California Press, 2012.

Hunt, Linda. "Practicing Oncology in Provincial Mexico: A Narrative Analysis." *Social Science and Medicine,* vol. 38, no. 6, 1994, pp. 843-853.

Hunter, Kathryn Montgomery. *Doctor's Stories*. Princeton University Press, 1991, Princeton, NJ.

Jackson Jr., John L. *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem*. Harvard University Press, 2013.

Latour, Bruno. *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Harvard University Press, 1999.

"Estate Planning." Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, 2021, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/estate_planning. Accessed 29 July 2021.

Lipsky, Michael. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. 30th anniversary expanded ed., Russell Sage Foundation, 2010.

Mathur, Nayanika. *Paper Tiger: Law, Bureaucracy and the Developmental State In Himalayan India*. Delhi, India: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Mattingly, Cheryl. *Healing Dramas and Clinical Plots: The Narrative Structure of Experience.* Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Mattingly, Cheryl. "In Search of the Good: Narrative Reasoning in Clinical Practice." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 12, 1998, pp. 273-297.

Moore, Sally Falk. *Law as Process: An Anthropological Approach*. Routledge & K. Paul, 1978.

Moore, Sally Falk. "The Ethnography of the Present and the Analysis of Process," *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, edited by Robert Borofsky, McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994.

Munn, Nancy. "The 'becoming-past' of places: Spacetime and memory in nineteenth, pre-Civil War New York." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2013, pp. 359-380.

Navaro-Yashin, Yael. "Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (New Series)* 15 (2009): 1-18.

New York Laws Estates, Powers & Trusts L § 1-2.6. Justia, 2020. https://law.justia.com/codes/new-york/2020/ept/article-1/part-2/1-2-6/ (accessed 29 July 2021).

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982.

Pinedo-Padoch, Sofia. "Wiretap: The Complex, Embodied Experience of Investigation." Paper presented at the American Ethnological Society's Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, 2016.

Pinedo-Padoch, Sofia. "Time After Death: Material Afterlives in the Work of Estate Administration." *Journal of Material Culture*, 27, no. 4 (2022): 432-449.

Pinker, Annabel. "Papering Over the Gaps." *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2015, pp. 97-112.

Pluciennik, Mark. "Archaeological Narratives and Other Ways of Telling." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 5, 1999, pp. 653–78.

Prior, Lindsay. "Repositioning Documents in Social Research." *Sociology*, vol. 42, no. 5, 2008, pp. 821–36.

Riles, Annelise. *The Network Inside Out*. University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Rosaldo, Renato. *The Day of Shelly's Death: The Poetry and Ethnography of Grief*. Duke University Press, 2014.
Rouse, Carolyn M. "Ethnography and Economies." *American Ethnologist*, 42, no. 1 (2015): 176-177.

Sandvik, Kristin Bergtora. "Blurring Boundaries: Refugee Resettlement in Kampala—between the Formal, the Informal, and the Illegal." *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, vol. 34, 2011, pp. 11-32.

Scherz, China. "Protecting Children, Preserving Families: Moral Conflict and Actuarial Science in a Problem of Contemporary Governance." *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, vol. 34, 2011, pp. 33-50.

Sellerberg, Ann-Marie. "Waiting and Rejection: An Organizational Perspective." *Time & Society*, 17, no. 2-3 (2008): 349-362.

Serres, Michel and Bruno Latour. *Conversations On Science, Culture, and Time*. University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Smart, Alan and Josephine Smart. "Time-Space Punctuation: Hong Kong's Border Regime and Limits on Mobility." *Pacific Affairs*, 81, no. 2 (2008): 175-193.

Stevenson, Lisa. "The psychic life of biopolitics: Survival, cooperation, and Inuit community." *American Ethnologist*. 39(3): 592-613, 2012.

Stewart, Kathleen. "Atmospheric Attunements." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29 (2011): 445-453.

Stoler, Ann Laura. "The Rot Remains: From Ruins to Ruination." In *Imperial Debris*, 52-77. Duke University Press, 2013.

Suresh, Mayur. "The 'Paper Case': Evidence and Narrative of a Terrorism Trial in Delhi." *Law & Society Review*, vol. 53, 2019, pp. 173-201.

Throop, C. Jason. "Moral Moods." *Ethos*, 42 (2014): 65-83.

Tompkins, Michael. *Digging Out: Helping Your Loved One Manage Clutter, Hoarding, and Compulsive Acquiring*. New Harbinger Publications, 2007.

Verdery, Katherine. *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton University Press, 1996.

Weber, Max. *Max Weber On Law In Economy and Society*. Harvard University Press, 1954.

Yngvesson, Barbara. "Responses to Grievance Behavior: Extended Cases in a Fishing Community." *American Ethnologist,* 3, no. 2 (1976): 353-373.

List of Prior Publications and Presentations of Dissertation Material

Publications

Pinedo-Padoch, Sofia. "Time After Death: Material Afterlives in the Work of Estate Administration." *Journal of Material Culture*, 27, no. 4 (2022): 432-449.

Presentations

2020 "Materiality, Time, and Value in the Work of Estate Administration." Paper for Material Temporalities Workshop, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Max Planck Research Group "Empires of Memory," Göttingen, Germany.

2019 "Things that Remain: Perspectives on Death and Hoarding in New York City." Paper for the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Vancouver, BC.

2018 "Life After Death in New York City: An Ethnography of Public Administration." Paper for the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Jose, CA.

2017 "The Public Administrator's Case Folder." Roundtable Paper for the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, DC.

2017 "Isolated Death: A Social Beginning." Paper for the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) Medical Anthropology Network 2017 Biennial Conference Network Meeting, Lisbon, Portugal.

2017 "Exposing the Isolated Dead." Paper for the American Ethnological Society's Annual Meeting, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA.