

Grave Goods and Dialectical Post-Death Agency in the Contemporary UK: Individual and Relational, Active and Passive, Past and Present

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Grave goods – that is, clothing and objects left with the deceased during burial or cremation, not subsequently easily retrievable by the living – can reveal a great deal about how the dead and their agency are conceptualized. While commonly associated with ancient funerary ritual, grave goods are also significant features in many UK funerals today, although they are not commonly talked about. Drawing on an ongoing multi-method study, this paper suggests that, in the contemporary UK context, wherein some 53% of funerals include grave goods, they reveal three dialectical tensions in post-death agency: individuality-relationality; past-present; and active-passive. They are also entwined with the agency of the living, of memory, and of material and memorial objects.

KEYWORDS: death, agency, grave goods, funerary ritual, UK, continuing bonds, dividuality, absence-presence

Grobni pridatki – torej oblačila in predmeti, položeni k pokojniku med pokopom ali upepelitvijo, ki jih živi pozneje ne morejo zlahka pridobiti nazaj – lahko razkrijejo veliko o tem, kako razumemo mrtve in njihovo delovanje. Čeprav jih navadno povezujemo z antičnimi pogrebnimi obredi, so grobni pridatki pomembna značilnost tudi številnih sodobnih pogrebov v Združenem kraljestvu, čeprav se o njih redko govori. Na podlagi obsežne raziskave, ki še poteka, članek pokaže, da v sodobnem britanskem kontekstu, kjer približno 53 % pogrebov vključuje grobne pridatke, ti razkrivajo tri dialektične napetosti v posmrtni delovalnosti: individualnost–odnosnost; preteklost–sedanjost; ter aktivnost–pasivnost. Hkrati so prepleteni tudi z dejavnostjo živih, spomina ter materialnih in spominskih predmetov.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: smrt, dejavnost, grobni pridatki, pogrebni obred, Združeno kraljestvo, nadaljevanje vezi, dividualnost, odsotnost–prisotnost

INTRODUCTION

Human identity, power and agency are enduring, entwined themes, demanding ongoing exploration across disciplines. As Woodthorpe (2010) suggests, this includes their intersections with death, dying, and memorialisation, not least in material and spatial forms. Grounding these “mega concepts” affords them “sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely about them, but /.../ creatively and imaginatively with them” (Woodthorpe, 2010: 224; see also Geertz, 1975: 23).

At its core, agency refers to the capacity to act and exert influence. In dominant framings such as Giddens' (1991), human agency entails independent actors deliberating and enacting decisions that shape their social and material environments (see Hockey, Komaromy, Woodthorpe, 2010: 9; Meese et al., 2015: 417–418; Hurtado, 2021: 4). For Giddens and others, exploring agency begets questions about what *limits* decision-making, activity, and influence.

Ostensibly, death significantly limits human agency. As Schwartz writes:

Human desire and intention reaches a stark impasse when it faces death, which always appears to us as something opposed to our own control or agency /.../ we are only at worst the bearers of death, whose arrival is always from without, otherwise than human, elsewhere, somewhere off stage. Death arrives, death takes us, death visits us, but even when we invite it, it is always a stranger who comes and goes at will. (Schwartz, 2013: 7)

Yet Schwartz, like others, challenges this presumed “impasse”, advocating more nuanced presentations (see, e.g., Williams, 2004; Harper, 2010; 2012), not least through explorations of death's materiality (Hockey, Komaromy, Woodthorpe, 2010: 9). Drawing on, for example, Latour (1993 [1983]) and Gell (1998), such scholarship stresses the complex intertwining of objects, environments, death and (post-death) agency. Hockey, Komaromy and Woodthorpe (2010: 9) thus describe “networks of human beings, inanimate objects and their surroundings /.../ as co-producers of meaning”. Some extend this, attributing agency to these objects and environments (Gell, 1998) prompting exploration of what Hallam and Hockey (2020: 14) call “transactions /.../ between the agency of persons and that of material objects” amid death.

Maddrell (2013) builds on these ideas, suggesting the “absent-present” dead have “paradoxical” agency (ibid.: 503, 517). “Absence-presence” traces to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1956 [1953]). Upon arriving in a café, expecting to find his friend Pierre, Sartre is instead greeted by Pierre's absence. The resulting experience of “nothingness” – of “not Pierre” – is impactfully “haunting”. Similarly, Maddrell suggests, the absence of the dead demands response, and thus has agency of its own (2013: 505; see also Meyer, Woodthorpe, 2008). This “relational absence-presence” (Maddrell, 2013: 509) is often entangled with objects and landscapes (ibid.: 513) and affords “vitality” and agency to the dead: a “literal sense of continued ‘presence’ despite bodily and cognitive absence” (Maddrell, 2013: 505) with which the bereaved must negotiate.

This interplay of absence and agency is bound up with memory, whose complex relationship(s) with death and memorialization have been explored extensively. As Hallam and Hockey observe in *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (2020 [2001]) memories can, “of their own accord, intrude or depart” (2020: 113) bringing the past to the present. Quoting Sheringham, they describe memory as “lodg[ing] the past ‘in the present like a foreign body’” (Sheringham, 1993: 293 in Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 105). In this, memory has a powerful “degree of agency”, (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 106) and can “disturb” the present (ibid.: 103, 114), evoking emotional responses and shaping social

realities (ibid.: 102), not least through physical, material phenomena. While memorials’ “force” derives from their “association with the *past* life of the deceased” (ibid.: 122, *italics mine*) they enact this force “*in the present*” (ibid.: 102, *italics original*), disrupting memory’s ostensibly past-facing orientation.

Post-death agency, then, is entwined and entangled: with the bereaved, memorial objects, environments, memory and pregnant absence. They might be said to have their own agency: object-agency, memory-agency, absence-agency, and so on. Following Langer (2010), we might differentiate between primary and secondary agency. Whereas the former is active, and typically allied to (living) persons, the latter is closer to the agency of “things” and “excludes the capacity to choose and the moral implications choice brings with it” (Langer, 2010: 86). Langer’s explorations of inquests, however, suggest the dead shift between primary and secondary agency. This is important when exploring, for example, necrophilia, wherein – as Troyer (2008) notes – ascribing corpses (primary) agency problematically detracts from their inability to choose.

This paper explores agency, particularly the agency of the dead, in relation to contemporary UK “grave goods”. It draws on the findings of ongoing study “Baggage for the Beyond”, the first significant study of grave goods in this context: clothing and objects left with the deceased during burial or cremation, not subsequently easily retrievable by the living. Typically framed historically or archaeologically (Parker Pearson, 1999), this practice persists today (Harper, 2012; Härke, 2014) but attracts conspicuously little research, not least because of its hidden, private nature (Harper, 2012). They, too, are somewhat absent-present. Existing research has been small-scale and local (single establishments; particular migrant communities, e.g. Harper, 2012; Holloway et al., 2019). This small literature suggests, though, that they are shaped by contextual factors, motivations and meanings – much like their historic counterparts, yet not identically so (Brück, 2004; Harper, 2012; Härke, 2014; Davies, 2015). In considering what these grave goods reveal about the post-death agency of the deceased, this paper explores their entanglement with other forms of agency, and grave goods’ own agency. Extending Maddrell’s work on absence-presence, it argues that grave goods illuminate three dialectical tensions in post-death agency: individuality-relationality; past-present; and active-passive. In turn, reflecting on these might support researchers to explore these dynamisms of post-death agency in relation to other aspects of memorialization.

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

It is difficult to summarise a “typical” UK funeral, not least insofar as the complexity of UK deathstyles matches the complexity of its cultural religious landscape (Riley et al., 2023). Practices also vary by area, and not least between its four constituent nations (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland). Until the late 20th century, Christian (and especially Anglican/Church of England) funerals dominated, even served as a default except where someone belonged to another specific religion (especially Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or Sikhism). This has changed dramatically in the 21st century. According to Rozario and Shimada:

[J]ust one in ten people now want a religious funeral. Today, most funerals are taken by independent civil celebrants – a trend that looks likely to continue as demand for religious services declines. Yet, celebrant-led funerals are not necessarily secular; at the request of the organiser, many incorporate spiritual or explicitly religious elements. (Rozario, Shimada, 2023: 49)

Such emphases on “organiser” requests, choice and personalization have become hugely important, a new UK funerary “default”. Incorporating symbols and signifiers of the deceased’s unique identity and life (upon which I expand below) has become a significant marker of “good” or “authentic” funerals, which are now widely framed as “celebrations of life” (SunLife, 2023; Rozario, Shimada, 2023). This can shape numerous funerary elements – from music, eulogy and flowers, to choice of coffin or disposal method – including, importantly, grave goods. That is not to say, however, that people are keen to make decisions in advance. While the number of people pre-purchasing or pre-planning funerals is growing, the vast majority are not: most funerals are bought and devised at the “point of need” (84.5% in 2019 – Competition and Markets Authority).

Cremation remains considerably more popular than burial (consistently, cremation is chosen in 75–80% cases), though natural burial has grown significantly in popularity since its introduction in the 1990s (Davies, Rumble, 2012). So-called “direct” cremation – in which there is no formal funeral service – is also growing in popularity (Rozario, Shimada, 2023: 48). Cremation and “natural burial” both have implications for those picking out grave goods, as some materials either cannot safely be cremated or are refused by natural burials sites on environmental grounds; for “conventional” cemetery or graveyard burial, and the interment of cremated remains, there are very few limitations.

“Baggage for the Beyond” is the first large-scale study of grave good practices in the contemporary UK. To build a broad yet detailed picture, it uses mixed methods, including a commissioned survey (YouGov, 2025) (n=2192, representative of UK adults, conducted online 27–28 March 2025). 53% of survey respondents had selected at least one grave good within the previous decade. Selecting from a list (including “Other: Please Specify”), the five most frequently selected were flowers (35%), clothing (19%), photographs (19%), letters, cards and notes (16%), and jewellery, watches and accessories (9%). However, this list masks the extraordinary variety of grave goods described in survey responses, interviews, and anecdotally: everything from dead pets and sex toys to potatoes, puzzles, mobile phones, and life-sized dolls. Moreover, interviews illustrated the importance not only of grave goods themselves, but of the decision-making process, and subsequent reflection.

This chapter draws primarily on the 29 semi-structured interviews completed at time of writing¹ with: bereaved individuals (14); professionals working in funeral care, celebrancy, cemetery and crematoria, and other death-related roles (10); and some speaking from both perspectives (5). Interviews aimed to gather in-depth insights into people’s experiences, decisions, and preferences regarding grave goods. Ethical approval was granted by University of Aberdeen’s ethical review committee for Arts, Social Sciences and Business (ID: 4710799).

¹ At time of writing, purposive recruitment is ongoing to increase sample diversity, particularly with regard to ethnicity and religion, to avoid unduly underrepresenting minority groups.

LOCATION	
England	19
Scotland	9
Wales	-
Northern Ireland	1
AGE	
18–25	-
25–29	3
30–34	2
35–39	-
40–44	5
45–49	2
50–54	2
55–59	4
60–64	4
65 and over	7
SEX	
Female	16
Male	13
RELIGION	
None	12
Buddhist	1
Christian (total)	10
Church of England/Anglican/Episcopal	4
Evangelical – Independent	3
Methodist	1
Presbyterian/Church of Scotland	2
Hindu	-
Jewish	2
Muslim	-
Sikh	-
Other	3
Prefer not to say	1
ETHNICITY	
White British/White English/White Scottish/White Irish	22
White – other	6
English–Israeli	1

Table 1: Interview sample demographics at time of writing (Data provided by the author)

Participants were recruited through opportunistic and carefully managed snowball sampling. Recruitment took place via adverts in professional newsletters, social media, word of mouth, and through community and professional gatekeepers. For practical and environmental reasons, interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. All names are pseudonyms.

- Grave goods you've picked out – or others have picked out – and the stories behind them
- The process of deciding which grave goods (if any) to pick – whose insights are in the mix?
- Motivations and deliberations when picking grave goods
- Any concerns or nervousness about picking grave goods (in general or in particular)
- The impact grave goods have on the bereaved (short-term when experiencing acute grief, as well as longer term)
- Anything else relating to grave goods you'd like to cover

Figure 1: List of interview topics provided in advance to interviewees (Supplied by the author)

Interviews deliberately had a conversational tone and flexible structure, on account of the subject matter's sensitivity, and to allow participants to guide discussion and shape the interview, elevating them as experts on their own experiences (Riley, 2022: 159; see also, e.g., Davies, 2008; Guillemin, Drew, 2010; Schielke, Debevec, 2012; Radford, 2022). Participants were sent a list of suggested themes beforehand, to reflect upon if they wished, with the caveat that preparation was neither *expected* nor necessary (Figure 1).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber, and analysed in NVivo12, combining qualitative thematic coding with critical close reading. This approach followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis principles, working iteratively, coding both purposively and inductively. Codes were grouped under five headings: A) Grave Goods; B) Death Attitudes and Norms; C) Other Aspects of Mourning and Memorial; D) Project Interests; and E) Interviewee Information. Data coded at four themes was particularly important in developing the present paper:

- Grave Goods "Why" – Motivations (A)
- Grave Goods' Effects (A)
- Grave Goods Decision Making – Who, When, How (A)
- Ludism and Irrationality² (D)

The findings below are grouped under three headings, each of which is presented as a two-word dialectic: individual-relational, past-present, and active-passive. All three trace recurring tensions and ambivalences through participants' experiences, understandings and discussions. While grouped thus for ease of reading, these dialectics are

² As I expand elsewhere (Riley, forthcoming) ludism is "perfectly serious and potentially transformative meaning-making through dealing simultaneously in two or more ways of classifying reality, and characterised by openness, even hopefulness". Those moments where participants considered the "irrationality" of, for example, leaving objects with the dead – became a specific project interest before interview analysis began, and were thus incorporated as a purposive code.

not discrete categories, but overlapping dynamics through which post-death agency is negotiated in relation to the living, memory and material objects. Together, they provide a framework for understanding grave goods as sites where post-death agency is variously afforded, enacted, constrained and transformed. In the same way that “absence-presence” (Maddrell, 2013) has become a widespread discourse and analytical framing in death studies, the discussion then proposes that these three additional dialectics might be valuable tools supporting critical reflection upon the ways in which post-death agency, presence and identity are navigated, negotiated, constrained and contingent.

FINDINGS

Individual-Relational

Asked what might motivate people to leave grave goods, Vanessa explained: *“it was multi-layered, I would say /.../ There’s never one reason why people are doing something”* (Vanessa, 2025). Similarly, funeral director Jessica suspected people *“probably can’t tell you what they want to achieve by grave goods /.../ [there] might be part of it that they don’t realise /.../ or that they aren’t articulating”* (Jessica, 2024).

Interviewees thus echoed analyses of historic (Härke, 2014) and contemporary (Harper, 2012) grave goods, suggesting motivations might be both multiple and opaque. Nevertheless, reflecting individual identity was a persistent intention: participants picked grave goods which captured some facet of the deceased – their biography, loved ones, interests, quirks, passions, or personality. The words “personal”, “favourite”, “close”, and “familiar” were widespread as interviewees explained their motivations. As Jessica put it, *“the whole point of it is that it is something personal”* (Jessica, 2024).

This emphasis on individuality was especially apparent in relation to clothing and appearance. Many interviewees felt it important that the dead wear things they “liked”, felt “good” or “comfortable” in, and “would have wanted”, ensuring they “looked like themselves”. This echoes Harper’s (2012) comparative study of grave goods in one North American and one UK funeral directing establishment: selected objects were typically “significant to the deceased, or [were] considered to represent the deceased’s identity” (Harper, 2012: 50).

This reflects a broader trend in the UK (and beyond – see Emke, 2002; Bremborg, 2006; Schäfer, 2007; Knopke, 2020) towards funerary personalization, which has deep-set origins. For example, the growing normative preference for individual (as opposed to mass or family) burials since the 17th and, especially, 19th and 20th centuries both reflected and reinforced this association; it was then extended to modern cremation (legalized in the late Victorian era), allying death and post-death agency to individual, not shared, spaces (Rugg, Parsons, 2018: 129; see also Gittings, 1984; Farrow, 2024; King, 2025). Nowadays, individual burial or cremation is the presumed default:³ the accidental

³ Burying/cremating people (e.g. mothers and babies) together is not unheard of or illegal, but requires negotiation and specific permission. By contrast, babies/“pregnancy remains” miscarried before 24 weeks’ gestation are, by default, buried or cremated in groups.

mixing of ashes or remains attracts moral concern. Beginning in the 1970s (Pine, Philips, 1970; Hyland, Morse, 1995; Walter, 1996; Howarth, 1999) personalization has become particularly significant since the millennium, using immaterial and material elements to centralize the “life and character” of the deceased (Caswell, 2011; Walter, 2017).

Grave goods thus worked in the manner of ritual symbols, as famously conceptualized by Turner. First formulated in *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner (1970) suggested symbols function by condensing meaning into (often) material forms. These forms’ meanings have two “poles”: ideological and sensory, respectively evoking desires and feelings, and norms and values (see also Uhrin, 2020) for those with the hermeneutic and understanding to interpret them. Grave goods condense individual identity and personality, reflecting the social value placed on individuality in UK life and death. Following Davies (2017: 4) we might also see them as “words against death”, material means of asserting life’s value when faced with death.

As Davies highlights, however, “words against death” are profoundly socially-orientated, reflecting the dead as members of social groups, such that “having encountered and overcome this experience [death] both the individual and society are transformed and gain a sense of power which motivates ongoing life” (Davies, 2017: 4). In *Natural Burial* (Davies, Rumble, 2012) he argues that it becomes very difficult “to think in terms of some discrete autonomy of isolated persons, and much more realistic to acknowledge individuals as part of a variety of social networks and webs” (ibid.: 7) when exploring this form of disposition. Davies and Rumble thus reject “radical individualism of autonomous persons” (ibid.: 9) instead emphasising entanglement and connectedness.

It is similarly difficult to think of grave goods as tied solely to “discrete autonomy of isolated persons”. In part, this is because grave goods are typically selected by others.⁴ As funeral director Hannah noted, “*relatives pick what they think their loved one would have wanted*” (Hannah, 2025). Harry selected items that “*would have made [my daughter] smile /.../ that we thought she would have liked*”, but that “*as usual with death, the dead actually get no say*” (Harry, 2024). In this, grave goods might be likened to colonial memorials, described by Holloway et al. (2019: 23) as “tool[s] for displaying identity” whereby “it was largely those left behind whose agency determined what was recorded”.

Moreover, many grave goods symbolised relationships and relationality. Vanessa described them as “*token[s] of the relationship*”; Maria as a way of “*symbolis[ing] that love*” (Vanessa, 2025; Maria, 2025); Protestant minister Robert as a way of “*consolidat[ing] that person’s love, attachment*” (Robert, 2025). Particularly with children, Robert suggested, grave goods extended caregiving: “*you want to envelop them in the eternal hug /.../ [that’s] the purest motivation*” (Robert, 2025). Funeral director Heather echoed this, suggesting they allowed mourners “*to carry on giving that care for as long as they can*” (Heather, 2024). Heather also shared the story of a woman who placed a potato in her husband’s coffin to symbolise their relationship: “*they’d met when they*

⁴ There are exceptions. Some do leave instructions about their grave goods – especially clothing. The YouGov survey (2025, see above) suggests maybe 3% of people leave such plans – but where they do, in Hallam and Hockey’s terms (2020), this affords “considerable post-mortem agency”, albeit deeply socially entangled, being dependent upon the adherence of the living.

were potato picking in Ireland, and he had attracted her attention by throwing a potato at her” (Heather, 2024). Kirsten left two books with her dad that he had read as a child and, later, to his children: “*I just love the fact that they are a personal touch /.../ that signifies that we knew him and we loved him*” (Kirsten, 2025).

Relationality was keenly important when people’s ashes were co-mingled or interred together. More commonly, photographs – among the most common grave goods – were used to reflect relationships, often showing the dead with loved ones. William buried his mother with a photo of his late father: it was “*the right thing to do, because Mum deeply missed Dad*” (William, 2024). Cathy’s mother-in-law’s coffin contained “*three roses /.../ from [her] three boys*” (Cathy, 2024). Letters, similarly, evoked relationship and interpersonal connection and communication. Like photographs and poems, they were described as “reminders” to the deceased: Laura cremated her grandfather with the poem she wrote for and read at his funeral, “*because I wanted him to have something that he would be reminded of me*” (Laura, 2025). These examples closely evoke the language and logic of “continuing bonds” grief models, which frame maintaining ongoing relationships with the dead as natural and beneficial (Klass et al., 1996; Swan, 2021; Hewson et al., 2023; Swan, 2024).

Mauss’ (1925) “gift theory” proposes that the exchange of “gifts” creates social force and bonds that sustain social life. Recalling both Mauss’ alienable and inalienable types, grave goods extend this beyond death, into continuing bonds. Framed as alienable gifts, grave goods echoed patterns of reciprocal exchange. Indeed, like Swan suggests (2021; 2024) some participants described grave goods as “gifts”, and some literally were: as Heather explained, “*We’ve had birthday cards, we’ve had Valentine’s cards. Things that you wanted to give to somebody when they were alive, you don’t stop wanting to give them to them*” (Heather, 2024). Beth’s grandmother was buried with knitted slippers, which she had regularly made as gifts: “*it was a family tradition, she would knit them all year round /.../ so my aunt absolutely put a pair of pea shoes on her feet*” (Beth, 2024). Grave goods also functioned as inalienable gifts, objects with sentimental, emotional value and force which reinforce kinship bonds, and confer a sense of relational identity (Mauss, 1925; see also Davies, 2015: 45–46).

Grave goods also illustrate the entanglement of identity with material objects. This entanglement has been widely discussed across disciplines, including studies of displacement: Parkin (1999: 304) observed that refugees carrying “articles of sentimental value which both inscribe and are inscribed by their own memories of self and personhood”. While suggesting that “material objects possess forms of agency” clashes with “prevalent Western distinction[s] made between animate and inanimate entities” Hallam and Hockey (2020: 114) identify such “distributed personhood” in material manifestations of death, dying and memorializing. They observe that objects

can be pressed into service as a focus for present and future remembering /.../ the deliberate selection and management of these materials is achieved through the exercise of human agency. (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 117–118)

In this, material objects “can become extensions of the body and therefore of personhood” (ibid.: 43). Similarly, Harper noted that some grave goods read as “extensions” of the deceased which “embodied their history, identity and relationships” (Harper, 2012: 50), becoming “inalienable property /.../ inextricably bound to his identity and personhood” (ibid.: 56). Interviewees echoed these suggestions. Heather suggested some objects were “*bound in the family’s minds with the identity of the person*”, indeed

so closely wound up with the person’s perception of the person that’s died that they can’t imagine them without it. /.../ It seems to be the case that that thing is inalienably theirs, and it would be wrong to take it away from them. (Heather, 2024)

Humanist celebrant Mark recalled checking repeatedly that a client was happy for her dad’s hat to be cremated with him. She responded, resolutely, “*No, it’s **got** to go with Dad*” (Mark, 2025), a marker of its intimate association and intertwining with his identity.

“Distributed personhood” was particularly evident with items worn regularly and closely to the body: glasses, watches and jewellery. Items like glasses, pacemakers and bodily metalwork facilitate and enhance people’s agency in life: leaving them in place in death perhaps symbolises the continued enablement of that agency. Vanessa suggested wedding rings, glasses and clothing “*become part of the body [and] cease to be a material object*”. She noted, “[*If*] *my grandmother, particularly, hadn’t had her glasses on, then it wouldn’t have been her*” (Vanessa, 2025). Similarly, Robert differentiated between food, which could be bought specifically as grave goods, and items like “*a necklace or a ring /.../ that has been handled, has been loved, has been worn*” (Robert, 2024). He noted, though, that this closeness and distributed personhood were precisely why some retained such jewellery, so as not to additionally or further “lose” the deceased. Grave goods also represented the distributed personhood of the living: as noted above, they function as something *of the living* by which the *dead* might “be reminded of” them and know that they were – are – loved, sending or leaving a part of themselves with their departed loved one.

Grave goods thus evoke both uniquely individual and profoundly relational identity, entangled in kinship ties and human-material bonds. This aligns with the notion of dividual personhood. Davies (2020) has advocated dividual approaches to death studies. Drawing on anthropological work in India (Marriott, 1976) and Melanesia (Strathern, 1988), dividual models of identity were developed in contrast to dominant Western conceptualizations, instead framing identity as porous, relational, and constituted through exchange:

[In place of] the image of a firmly bounded and almost insular person [this is] one who is much less bounded and much more open to the being, influence, presence and participation of others /.../ Dividual personhood describes someone whose boundaries with others and the wider environment must be considered as selectively open for a variety of ‘flows’ of materials, relations and the emotions that constitute personhood. (Davies, 2020: 4)

Grave goods illuminate the value of this relational model.

Past-Present

Christopher and Alisdair echoed many of the above observations concerning grave goods, individual identity, relationality, ongoing “continuing bonds” and continued caregiving. Death professional Christopher suggested “*it’s [grave goods are] about that lasting memory of that person /.../ that connection, that love, and knowing that they’re still with them*” (Christopher, 2025). Healthcare chaplain Alisdair also closely juxtaposed these themes:

[It’s] the idea of a personality, of something being there with them that they loved, and defining them rather than just being another body in the ground /.../ that sense that something else is with them or they’re always thinking of them /.../ it helps them [relatives] to know that they’re connected /.../ that they’ve looked after them. (Alisdair, 2025)

He provided some grave goods to specifically evoke and literalise ongoing connection:

[For] any child that dies in the hospital, we’ll speak with their siblings, and we give them these elephants. So, each sibling gets an elephant, and [one] goes with the child who’s died. The story behind that is mainly that elephants never forget, and you never forget your loved one /.../ Then at [the hospice], if anyone has any grandchildren or any children /.../ I’ll offer this to them [too]. [It’s about] always knowing that that person never goes away, that that person’s always there for you /.../ there’s that invisible string between the elephants, that when I’m holding this elephant, I’m holding my dad or my mum or my gran. (Alisdair, 2025)

Evoking such continued relationships, grave goods thus extend the dead’s presence, influence and agency in the present. This continuity, however, must be held in tension with a strongly *past* orientation. Many participants situated the dead’s activity and agency firmly in the past, stressing that they were now “dead” and unable to perceive grave goods. For example, Elly initially reacted to the suggestion that she might write a letter for her daughter’s coffin by thinking “*that’s silly, you know, like why would I do that? Like, she’s not going to read it!*” (Elly, 2024). Kirsten said the same of the books in her dad’s coffin: “*I don’t feel like he’s reading them or anything like that!*” (Kirsten, 2025). Harry was clear: his daughter “*was dead*” (Harry, 2024); worrying about the dead being “*too cold*” was irrational. Jessica described clients leaving biscuits and chocolate with the dead, and asking “*if that’s silly*” since “*we know that it’s not going to transmogrify /.../ know that that person is not going to eat that biscuit*” (Jessica, 2024). Importantly, though, many of these interviewees and their clients had nevertheless picked out grave goods, finding them meaningful and valuable: as Jessica put it, “*it’s not rational, but that doesn’t mean it’s not the right thing for them to do*” (Jessica, 2024). Elsewhere, I have presented this dynamic as “ludic” simultaneously entertaining two versions of reality (Riley, forthcoming). For our present purposes, it illustrates a past-yet-present quality afforded to the dead.

Correspondingly, some participants described grave goods as tools for “closure”, and “moving on”. Heather noted that some left grave goods when last visiting someone’s body: the point “*when what is in the coffin ceases to be their husband or their mother /.../ That [grave good] is the token, that is the final, ‘right, we’re going now’*” (Heather, 2024). Cathy described them as “*part of the goodbye /.../ I think grave goods are important, because it does give people a sense of closure*” (Cathy, 2024).

In this vein, many echoed Emke’s (2002) suggestion that “the ‘function’ of funerals [is framed] generally in terms of what they do for the living, not for the deceased” (Emke, 2002: 273), suggesting grave goods were principally “for the living”, what Harry called a “*comfort for us*” (Harry, 2024). As Vanessa put it, they were “*more /.../ comforting for the living than comforting for the dead, aren’t they? Even though the living might be imagining they’re comforting for the dead*” (Vanessa, 2025). Curiously, Steven mixed past- and present-orientations, describing grave goods as “*final goodbyes*” yet as signs that “*that person’s not out of mind, they’re just out of sight*” (Steven, 2025). This duality reflects both “continuing bonds” and 20th-century “attachment and loss” models, closely associated with Freud (1917) and Bowlby (1969–1980) wherein grief involves severing ties with the deceased and must be overcome by “letting go”. These models afford the dead little agency, restricting them to the past. Grave goods evoke both models, holding past- and present-orientations in tension.

In this way, grave goods epitomize Woodthorpe’s (2010) claim that material memorials are “powerful tool[s] in terms of identity (re)formation, through the merging of mementoes and objects with memories of the deceased person, and a life-once-lived” (Woodthorpe, 2010: 122). Similarly, grave goods reflect what Davies (2015; 2017) has called “*retrospective* fulfilment of identity” in contemporary UK deathways. Whereas historically, Christian churches emphasized “eschatological fulfilment of identity” (Davies, 2017: 162–163), twentieth century secularisation had encouraged emphasis on “this-worldly fulfilment of life through human relationships, rewarding work and leisure” (ibid.), manifest in, for example, personalized funerals and ash dispersal at sites which encapsulate the deceased’s affections and biography, forming “physical memories” (ibid.) and emphasising “earthly life /.../ a sense of the significance of the life that is ended /.../ rooted [in] the deceased person’s former life as now presented to the imaginative memory of mourners” (ibid.: 256).

Davies’ language — “a life that is ended”, “the deceased person’s former life” — echoes Woodthorpe’s “life-once-lived”. Yet, counteracting this stark backwards-orientation, both Woodthorpe and Davies also refer to memory: the “imaginative memory of mourners” (Davies, 2015: 256). As noted above, memory is not singularly or straightforwardly past-oriented (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 114). Rather, memory-agency affords past lives present force (ibid.: 102, 122) which may be welcome or unwelcome. Wojtkowiak and Venbrux (2009; 2010) have suggested that home memorials — typically assemblages of photographs, candles and small personal possessions — create “ritual space for mourning and remembering [and] continuing bonds with the dead” (2010: 234). Hockey, Komaromy and Woodthorpe (2010: 231) have similarly explored the object-agency of roadside memorials, noting their “prompting power” may prompt unwanted mortal reflections.

As we have seen, some grave goods have “living” or retained counterparts – the second half of a keyring, a matching elephant or bear. Others have living *equivalents* which may trigger memories – a corresponding wedding ring, similar home-made item, or favourite kind of food seen in a shop. Some retain images in which objects that are now grave goods feature (or, much more uncommonly, take photographs of someone in their coffin alongside their grave goods). These visible examples may have “prompting power” and object-agency akin to home or roadside memorials⁷. But many grave goods are invisible. Ostensibly, this reduces their object-agency and capacity to “disturb” the present. Indeed, some participants could not recall what they had selected; and others deliberately chose to inter belongings to limit present reminders. Funeral professional Steven described a client who buried many of his wife’s clothes and wedding rings, partly because they were “hers”, but also *“I can’t have it about, because I’ll see it. I don’t want to see it”* (Steven, 2025).

Conversely, some chose to retain certain items precisely to prompt memory. As neonatal nurse Maria explained, in her experience, parents of stillborn children fell into two categories:

I’ve seen both sides, I’ve seen parents /.../ take everything that they can home, because they will be holding onto their memories and to their smell and stuff, and I see other parents that want the baby to have the blanket /.../ for comfort, because they don’t want the baby to be by themselves. (Maria, 2025)

Visibly absent grave goods could still, though, demonstrate object-agency and memory-agency, rendering the dead present and affording them absent-present agency in turn. For example, spending time at her mother’s graveside prompted reflection on the objects Joanne and her siblings selected to go in her coffin – including a special necklace, photographs and her grandchildren’s drawings – and thus on her mother:

When I go up to her graveside and I put flowers down, I know she’s not on her own in that box. I know she’s got things with her that are from her family. And yeah, I suppose that was part of it, because when that lid closed, she wasn’t on her own. She had things with her /.../ She was so pretty. If I think about her funeral, or if I think about that time /.../ it’s as though it just happened yesterday. It’s so vivid in my mind. (Joanne, 2024)

Like other richly symbolic material mourning objects, grave goods can “trigger” embodied responses, which “in turn, transform the significance of material objects as the process unfolds”, a cycle of meaning, memorial and materiality with its own dynamism (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 11; see also Williams, 2004; Harper, 2010; Schwarz, 2013). They render the dead present even as they mark a life that has ended, affording the dead present significance, presence and agency, which will extend to the future: “people’s perceptions of the past are reworked in the context of the present and in anticipation of the future” (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 3).

Active-Passive

Just as Hallam and Hockey (2020) observe that memory is not strictly past-oriented, they also stress that it is dynamic, with an evolving present- and future-orientation. This contrasts with popular notions that memories are “things”:

... we ‘keep’ and ‘preserve’ /.../ as though they are objects in a personal museum [which] we choose when to disclose or display [and] are, therefore, associated with individual agency /.../ we imagine ourselves to be /.../ ‘in control’ /.../ While they are attributed something approximating an object status, memories are also routinely regarded as ‘static’, as imprints retained and fixed /.../ that a memory and the experience it arises out of are identical. (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 3)

Contrastingly, Hallam and Hockey state clearly what many only “dimly” perceive, and may find troubling: that “memories cannot be conflated with actuality” (2020: 24). In turn, since the “recovery of the dead as social (if not physically present) agents” takes place through memory/ies, these are “open memories”, subject to “retrospective reconstruction” (ibid.).

Altena’s work (2009) on funerary films – both of funerals (documentaries) and those portraying the dead – reflects and expands on this. Both film types “consist of elaborate compilations of objects, images and words /.../ supposed to symbolise the deceased person’s identity” (Altena, 2009: 170), and filmmakers claim “both /.../ are alike reflections of the deceased’s identity” (ibid.: 159) and “true to life” (ibid.: 164). Altena, though, argues they are “constructed”, “shaped according to what the bereaved thought ‘fitting’” (ibid.), belying conflation of “identity and memory”, considered “so closely intertwined, they are presented as one and the same” (ibid.). Yet they are not: in both films and memories, “[l]ike pieces of a quilt, the visible traces of someone’s life are reconstructed as a coherent story” (ibid.: 165). Walter (1996: 7) has made similar observations of personalized funerals: they help the bereaved to “integrate the memory of the deceased into their ongoing lives”, affording the dead active ongoing presence; but *the bereaved* design them, reflecting *their* evolving version of the deceased’s identity.

Participants saw grave goods as reflections of changing relationships. As above, some were considered markers of “closure”, the fundamental changes to identity and relationships presented by death. For others, grave goods’ meanings and their relationships with them changed with time, mirroring shifting relationships with both the dead and their memories. When their daughter was stillborn, hospital staff provided grave goods to Elly and her husband: a two-part keyring and two matching bears, whereby “*one of it stays with the baby, and one of it is for us to keep*” (Elly, 2024). Initially, Elly felt “*they didn’t mean a lot to me specifically*”, but she included them, concerned she might “*regret*” not doing so (Elly, 2024). With time, she found these material “*tie[s] to the body*” gained meaningfulness – “*more than I expected*” (Elly, 2024). Similarly, as time passed following his daughter’s death, Harry (2024) explained “*things have become clearer, like a fog’s maybe lifted /.../ if you’d asked me then [i.e. immediately after her death] I wouldn’t have*

understood, and I wouldn't have remembered" her grave goods and their significance. But as his grief became less "*close*" they became "*comforting*"; they "*made me smile*" (Harry, 2024). Memories, once troubling, had shifted in place and potency.

Grave goods' significance, like memory, is therefore not static. Their meaningfulness can change with time, and with them their attendant memories and the place of the dead in the ongoing lives of the living. In this sense, grave goods evoke not only "continuing" but also "transforming bonds". As Mathijssen (2018: 218) explains, this framework emphasises that "both the relationship as well as the social location of the bereaved and the deceased are gradually altered". Maddrell (2010; 2013) has similarly observed how material and spatial mourning enable the living to negotiate "*evolving* relation to the absence-presence of the deceased and the places associated with them" (Maddrell, Sidaway, 2010: 22–23).

By reflecting and shaping transforming bonds, grave goods grant the dead continuing presence, significance and agency which evolve and are thus, in some senses, active. Equally, though, this ongoing transformation also reveals the dead's dependence on the living; their ongoing agency is thus contingent and somewhat passive. Such dependence and dual activity-passivity also appear in studies of memorialization. For example, Recuber (2021) has explored the "double victimization" of Black men and women killed by USA police, whose deaths are subsequently broadcast online: their presence remains, yet they lose "not only their lives but also the agency to define themselves and the ways they'd like to be remembered" (Recuber, 2021: 684). Caswell and O'Connor's (2015) work on dying alone also reflects active-passive agency. Against the normative grain of contemporary UK constructions of a "good death", dying alone may reflect the exercise of individual "agency, of a social actor who is able to make independent decisions and enact them" (Caswell, O'Connor, 2015: 3). Yet, post-death, this agency can be defied and denied. Using the example of Mr Jackson, who chose to die alone, they note:

[a]fter his death [he] was subject to processes which revived his social life, with no input from him and without consideration to his wishes. Mr Jackson exhibited agency during his life time, but lost the power to exercise choice after undergoing a lone death. (Ibid: 2)

In a similar way, some interviewees had chosen grave goods which they suspected the dead might not straightforwardly have wanted or have chosen themselves. Kate, for example, put her sister's ashes in her mum's coffin. Unable to agree about dispersal when her sister had died twenty years previously, Kate felt this "*finally /.../ reunited*" them, giving both a "*final resting place*" (Kate, 2024). On the one hand, it felt "*nice for them to be together in that coffin*", a representation of their relationship. Yet it was also

... cheeky in a way /.../ They didn't always get on as well as they could have done. So, in a way, it was quite funny to stick them both in the same coffin, because it's almost like if they were people, they'd have to get on /.../ Now you're stuck there now forever. Perpetuity and perpetuity. (Kate, 2024)

Vanessa's mother had dementia for several years before she died. During her illness, she

started carrying around a cuddly monkey /.../ one of my soft toys from when I was a child /.../ he became known as Charlie. And he went with her everywhere. And so when she died, he was on the bed with her /.../ And I said, "Charlie's to go with her". (Vanessa, 2025)

In some ways, this felt "*appropriate*" to Vanessa, and meant she could avoid "*fac[ing] what to do with Charlie*" (Vanessa, 2025). Equally, "*looking back on it, [with] the distance of time, I'm thinking goodness – she'd have hated being buried with a teddy!*" This incongruity worked as a prompt, rendering her mother present: "*I'm imagining [her] thinking 'Well, why did you do that?'*" (Vanessa, 2025).

These grave goods were personal and relational, yet incongruous and perhaps unwelcome, highlighting the relative passivity of the dead, contrasted to the decision-making power of the living. Following Langer (2010), they both afford the dead *secondary* agency, which "excludes the capacity to choose" (Langer, 2010: 86) how they are remembered, even as they render them active. Their activity is enacted insofar as they are passive. This recalls Parrott's work on collections belonging to the dead (2011). While displaying their collections mean they are "given agency, immortalised and remembered through collections" (Parrott, 2011: 292), Parrott's passive language – *given agency* – reinforces her observation that these "mnemonic connections" can undergo "transformations" as the living interact with them (ibid.: 289). Though people may prepare their collections before their death, they will ultimately have to hand over control, revealing "the potential contradictions of securing future remembrance" (ibid.).

DISCUSSION

Together, the three dialectical tensions identified in this paper – individual-relational, past-present, and active-passive – present grave goods as a funerary and memorial practice through which post-death agency is negotiated, distributed and, at times, constrained. Grave goods are anchors for continuing bonds, memory and memorialization, but their selection, typically, by those closest to the deceased means the living manage the dead's social afterlives, prioritising, fixing (and, correspondingly, excluding or deprioritising) particular narratives, relationships or facets. They allow the dead to remain present, but not fully participatory, tied elastically to the past; active, but not straightforwardly agentic; individual, but in a state of managed dependence on others. Grave goods exemplify secondary agency: the dead exert ongoing influence through memory, absence and material association, but are contingent upon the interpretive and curatorial labour of the living.

This has important implications for how we understand post-death agency. Rather than asking whether the dead *have* agency, this paper suggests we should ask how it is *allocated, mediated and negotiated*, not least materially. Like Maddrell's (2013) now-familiar suggestion that the dead are rendered absent-present through material and spatial

memorialising, this invites explorations of post-death agency as relational, temporal and unevenly distributed. It advances this conversation by suggesting three additional dialectics, both entangled with one another and, independently, a valuable analytical tool. Moreover, these dialectics are grounded in a remarkably widespread aspect of UK funerary culture which has hitherto received very little academic attention or popular discourse: it is commonplace yet concealed. This might prompt further reflection on why *the practice itself* is dialectically absent-present.

By foregrounding grave goods as convergence points for memory, materiality and agency, this paper argues for their significance within contemporary death studies, and their clear value as a case study for reflection by both academics and death professionals. An intimate practice framed by policy and regulation, grave goods also reveal how post-death agency is socially regulated (Macpherson et al., forthcoming). Decisions are shaped by crematoria rules, environmental discourses, professional norms and moral sensibilities as well as personal and familial preferences. They are thus points at which private memory intersects with institutional authority and cultural expectations about what constitutes an appropriate relationship with the dead. Paying attention to these practices which are both common, yet hidden, might prove deeply revealing of how death is lived with and managed in the present.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored contemporary UK “grave goods”, objects placed with the dead in burial or cremation, which cannot be subsequently retrieved. Selecting and reflecting upon grave goods is an important practice for a significant proportion of people in the UK, intertwining mourning, memory and materiality. Interviewees presented grave goods as “personal” symbols and material extensions of identity, capturing the unique, individual dead. Yet they were also deeply relational. Chosen largely by the bereaved, they often symbolised enduring bonds, love, and care. In Mauss’ (1925) terms, they functioned as both alienable and inalienable gifts, reinforcing kinship ties and continuing emotional connection beyond death. They thus epitomise interconnected, “dividual” post-death personhood.

Grave goods also situate the dead in both past and present. Though allied to “closure” and “moving on”, locating the dead in the past, both memories of grave goods and the memories they evoked granted them ongoing significance and space in the lives of the living. They thus epitomise Scarre’s (2007) observation that, in death and memorialisation: “our own efforts interlock with those of other people in complex patterns of agency that do not come to an end as soon as we do. In fact /.../ there is little that we do that ever becomes ‘purely past’” (Scarre, 2007: 43). This “interlocking” rendered the dead both active and passive. Grave goods afforded the deceased secondary agency: they remained influential, yet fundamentally dependent on the living for their symbolic activation and memorialisation. Their significance shifted with time, evoking both continuing and *transforming* bonds, facilitating an ongoing recalibration of meaning, memory, and identity.

Grave goods thus illustrate complex, layered interplay of (post-death) agency, identity, memory and materiality. Where Maddrell and others have explored mourning, material culture and memory in terms of “absence-presence”, this article proposes that post-death agency can also be understood in terms of three further dialectics: individual-relational; past-present; and active-passive. Future research might, as Woodthorpe (2010: 224) invites, consider whether and how well each of these illuminates other aspects of death’s materiality, facilitating concrete but creative exploration.

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GRABBEIGABEN UND DIALEKTISCHE POST-DEATH-AGENTUR IM HEUTIGEN GROSSBRITANNIEN: INDIVIDUELL UND RELATIONAL, AKTIV UND PASSIV, VERGANGENHEIT UND GEGENWART

Wie die Forschung gezeigt hat, gibt es ein komplexes Zusammenspiel zwischen menschlicher Identität, Macht und Entscheidungsfreiheit – insbesondere im Kontext von Tod, Sterben und Gedenken. Nach traditionellem Verständnis ist Entscheidungsfreiheit die Fähigkeit einer lebenden Person zu handeln und Entscheidungen zu treffen (z. B. Giddens, 1990). Daher wird der Tod oft als Begrenzung dieser Handlungsfähigkeit angesehen. Neuere wissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse haben diese Annahme jedoch in Frage gestellt und auf viele Arten hingewiesen, in denen die Toten durch Erinnerungen, Objekte und Orte weiterhin Einfluss ausüben.

Um die Literatur zu den Auswirkungen nach dem Tod und ihrer Komplexität zu erweitern, stützt sich dieser Artikel auf die erste große Studie über zeitgenössische britische Grabbeigaben – Kleidung und Gegenstände, die bei dem Verstorbenen während der Beerdigung oder Einäscherung zurückgelassen wurden und die später von den Lebenden nicht einfach zurückgeholt werden können. Durch die Untersuchung dieser Objekte identifiziert der Artikel drei Dialektische Spannungen in der Handlungsfähigkeit nach dem Tod: Individualität/Relationalität, Vergangenheit/Gegenwart und Aktiv/Passiv.

Während früher christliche Beerdigungen die Regel waren, werden die meisten modernen Beerdigungen im Vereinigten Königreich heute von zivilen Zelebranten geleitet, oft sehr individuell und als „Feiern des Lebens“ gestaltet. Personalisierung ist für das, was heute als „gute“ Beerdigung gilt, von zentraler Bedeutung geworden und beeinflusst Elemente wie Musik, Lesungen und Grabbeigaben. Die Einäscherung ist nach wie vor die beliebteste Methode der Leichenbestattung, obwohl die natürliche Bestattung und die direkte Einäscherung immer häufiger vorkommen und jeweils Auswirkungen auf Grabbeigaben haben.

Für die Forschung wurden verschiedene Methoden verwendet: eine repräsentative Umfrage, Dokumentenanalyse, halbstrukturierte Einbindung und halbstrukturierte Interviews. Die Forschung stützt sich in erster Linie auf die bisher durchgeführten 29 halbstrukturierten Interviews mit Hinterbliebenen und Sterbeexperten. Die Online-Interviews folgten einem flexiblen, von den Teilnehmern geleiteten Format und konzentrierten sich insbesondere auf die Motivation, Entscheidungsfindung und die eigene Wahrnehmung der Auswirkungen von Grabbeigaben. Die Transkriptanalyse folgte den Prinzipien der thematischen Analyse (Braun, Clarke, 2006).

Individuell/Relational

Viele wählten Grabbeigaben, die die Persönlichkeit, Vorlieben und Biografie des Verstorbenen widerspiegeln, etwa Kleidung und persönliche Gegenstände. Diese individuelle Identität und Handlungsfähigkeit nach dem Tod ist jedoch zutiefst relational: Die meisten Grabbeigaben werden von geliebten Menschen ausgewählt und spiegeln oft gemeinsame Erinnerungen und Beziehungen wider. Grabbeigaben symbolisieren für viele fortlaufende emotionale Bindungen und

Pflege indem sie Liebe, Erinnerung und Verbundenheit fortführen, und erinnern an das Trauermodell der „Weiterbestehenden Bindungen“, bei dem die Beziehungen zum Verstorbenen fortbestehen. In Anlehnung an die Schenkungstheorie von Mauss fördert der Austausch von Grabbeigaben die soziale Beziehung auch über den Tod hinaus. Darüber hinaus deutet die Verflechtung von Identität mit materiellen Objekten auf Vorstellungen von „verteilter“ und „dividueller“ Persönlichkeit hin, bei der Identität über Beziehungen und Objekte hinweg geteilt wird.

Vergangenheit/Gegenwart

Grabbeigaben bekräftigen die fortlaufende Beziehung zu den Toten und markieren zugleich ihre Abwesenheit. Obwohl sie die fortlaufende Anwesenheit und Bedeutung des Verstorbenen hervorriefen, betrachteten andere sie als Mittel zur abschließenden Verarbeitung oder „letzten Abschied“. Dies spiegelt einen umfassenderen Wandel der britischen Bestattungskultur von eschatologischer zu retrospektiver Identitätserfüllung wider mit dem Schwerpunkt auf Erinnerung, Biografie und persönlicher Verbindung. Grabbeigaben können starke Erinnerungen und verkörperte Reaktionen hervorrufen, die die Grenzen zwischen Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft verzerren und die Handlungsfähigkeit des Verstorbenen durch Erinnerung und Materialität aufrechterhalten.

Aktiv/Passiv

In diesem letzten Abschnitt wird untersucht, wie Grabbeigaben die sich entwickelnde Natur der Erinnerung und der Beziehung zu den Toten reflektieren und deren dynamischen, rekonstruierten Charakter hervorheben. In derselben Weise verändern Grabbeigaben ihre Bedeutung und spiegeln sich verändernde emotionale Zustände, Identitäten und Beziehungsbindungen wider. Dies steht im Einklang mit dem Konzept der „verwandelnden Bindungen“ (transforming bonds) (Mathijssen, 2018).

Doch diese gedenkenden und materiellen Praktiken hängen von den Entscheidungen der Lebenden ab und unterstreichen, dass Grabbeigaben sowohl Spiegelungen als auch Konstrukteure von Identität sind, die in fortlaufende Prozesse der Trauer, Erinnerung und Bedeutungsbildung verwickelt sind. Sie illustrieren wie aktiv der Tote gedacht wird, ihr Vermächtnis jedoch von den Lebenden geprägt wird.