

Placemaking by the Dead: Cemeteries as Emotional, Moral and Ritual Places

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This article examines cemeteries in north-eastern Slovenia as deathscapes where the dead act as emotional, moral and ritual agents. Drawing on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2024, the study explores how relationships with the dead are maintained, transformed or disrupted through spatial practices and affective encounters. Everyday acts of care, such as tending graves or communicating with the deceased sustain cemeteries as places of moral continuity and family responsibility. At the same time, some encounters with the dead reveal more unsettling aspects of these relationships, where unresolved ties extend beyond death and require ritual intervention. Approaching *continuing bonds* from a spatial perspective, the article argues that relationships with the dead persist also through embodied practices tied to place.

KEYWORDS: cemetery, agency of the dead, deathscapes, continuing bonds, vernacular religion, spatial anthropology, Slovenia

Članek obravnava pokopališča v severovzhodni Sloveniji kot pokrajine smrti, v katerih umrli delujejo kot čustveni, moralni in ritualni akterji. Na podlagi desetmesečnega etnografskega terenskega dela, izvedenega leta 2024, raziskava preučuje, kako se odnosi z umrlimi ohranjajo, preoblikujejo ali prekinjajo skozi prostorske prakse in afektivna srečanja. Vsakdanja dejanja skrbi, kot so urejanje grobov in pogovori z umrlimi, ohranjajo pokopališča kot kraje moralne kontinuitete in družinske odgovornosti. Hkrati pa nekatere izkušnje stika z mrtvimi razkrivajo tudi moteče razsežnosti teh vezi, kjer se nerešeni odnosi raztezajo onkraj smrti in zahtevajo ritualno posredovanje. Na pojmovni ravni članek opredeli *model kontinuiranih vezi* skozi prostorsko perspektivo ter pokaže, da vezi z umrlimi vztrajajo tudi v utelešenih, krajevno umeščenih praksah.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: pokopališče, delovanje umrlih, pokrajine smrti, kontinuirane vezi, vernakularna religija, prostorska antropologija, Slovenija

INTRODUCTION

When I arrived in the field in north-eastern Slovenia in early January 2024 and while travelling through the hilly landscape where I was to conduct my research, I was immediately struck by the remarkable density of cemeteries in small villages. These settlements, typically consisting of 100 to 200 inhabitants spread across only 3 to 4 km², often include a fire station, a chapel, a football pitch, and one or two, sometimes even three, cemeteries.

In some larger villages or more dispersed communities, the number of cemeteries can be even higher. This pattern, much less common in western Slovenia, immediately drew my attention. In the region, marked by a long history of both Catholicism and Protestantism, people were traditionally buried in separate cemeteries according to their religious affiliation. In recent decades, however, this division has become more fluid, particularly among younger generations and within mixed-denomination families.

People visit cemeteries with varying frequency: every day, every week, after mass, on public holidays, or on the anniversary of a deceased loved one's death or birthday. Reasons for visiting also vary, including participating in burial rituals, tending graves, lighting candles, or visiting the deceased to talk with them, ask for advice, seek comfort, or resolve unresolved issues. What is certain, however, is that the place is associated with the dead and is widely perceived as a place where the dead are somehow present. As Colombo and Vlach (2021: 218) wrote, "a visit to the cemetery and remembrance of the dead is a way to confirm the link between life and death, and a tribute to a grave re-calls the connection between the living and the dead".

In popular culture, cemeteries are frequently portrayed as eerie, fearful, liminal, or even dangerous places (see Carrassi, 2023). Hallam et al. (1999) situate these interpretations within a broader critique of modernity, suggesting that contemporary Western societies, preoccupied with youth, productivity and vitality, struggle to meaningfully integrate death into public discourse and social life. Yet despite their associations with ghosts, decay or horror motifs in popular culture, cemeteries can also evoke solace, comfort and even joy. They elicit a range of emotional responses, including sadness and longing for peace, nostalgia and reflection. Death, burial and moments of final farewell can make the cemetery a place of profound sadness and even trauma. Although cemeteries are often most strongly associated with ritualised moments of loss, they are also spaces for reflection, ongoing care and remembrance. Over time, the accumulation of ritual practices, material artefacts and commemorative places helps create highly personal and emotionally resonant landscapes of mourning, places that are actively engaging and often more intimate than other, more utilitarian places of everyday life. This helps preserve cemeteries as relational places in which individuals and communities maintain affective and symbolic ties with the deceased. For many people, cemeteries are precisely the places where the boundary between the living and the dead feels closest.

In this article, drawing on ethnographic material, I explore how cemeteries function not only as places of burial and remembrance. Cemeteries are also social and affective places animated by the ongoing presence of the dead. The article examines how the agency of the dead shapes people's spatial practices, perceptions and emotional engagement with cemeteries. In particular, I analyse what triggers the agency of the dead and how this contributes to placemaking processes. In doing so, the discussion broadens understanding of the role of the dead in shaping space.

METHODOLOGY

This discussion draws on fieldwork conducted from January to November 2024 in north-eastern rural Slovenia. The fieldwork material was gathered using a classical ethnographic approach combining participant observation and semi-structured interviews to explore how people experience, interpret and deal with the agency of the dead in everyday life. During the fieldwork, I visited 24 small villages and their cemeteries, and conducted interviews with 154 interlocutors of different ages and genders. However, due to the demographic composition of the region,¹ I mainly spoke with older interlocutors, with female participants outnumbering male participants. While men described fewer personal experiences with the deceased, they emphasised ritual responsibilities towards the deceased – especially grave maintenance and participation in collective practices of remembrance.

In this region, which has a long history of both Catholicism and Protestantism (Lutheran), most of my interlocutors identified as Catholic, reflecting the broader demographic composition. Nevertheless, I deliberately included Protestant perspectives, and about one-third of my interlocutors were members of the Lutheran Church. Both Catholic and Protestant participants contributed their views, with denominational differences² most clearly manifested in ritual interventions such as blessings, prayers and cemetery maintenance or visits.

The use of narratives and cemetery-related practices in the anthropological understanding of place focuses on how local people construct, perceive and engage with their environments. Narratives and their interpretations are central to my methodology in this paper. As Keith Basso (1996: 68) notes, cultural constructions of landscape can only be understood by talking to people about the places they inhabit. This narrative-based approach is particularly suited to studying the agency of the dead, whose influence cannot be directly observed but becomes perceptible through the stories, memories and interpretative frameworks of the living. Through such narratives, the deceased emerge as active participants, comforting, unsettling or obligating the living, and in doing so, shape both practices and spatial meanings. Alongside narratives, I also attend to practices, which I documented and interpreted most effectively through (participant) observation.

This paper unfolds in four stages. First, I introduce cemeteries as deathscapes, embodied and affective environments where the dead shape these places emotionally,

¹ A demographic analysis (Malačič, 2011) of the broader area in which my fieldwork was conducted – encompassing several of the same municipalities – shows that in all eleven municipalities studied, the proportion of women is higher than that of men. This pattern results from selective migration and higher male mortality. The area is also characterised by pronounced population ageing, driven by low fertility rates and the out-migration of younger generations. The proportion of children is lower than the Slovenian average in almost all municipalities, while the share of residents aged 80 and over exceeds the national level throughout the area.

² Although prayers, floral offerings and candle-lighting for the souls of the deceased are often perceived as the primary or even exclusive forms of remembrance and engagement with the deceased, Protestant reforms legally restricted or abolished several of these practices (e.g. prayers for the souls in purgatory, evening visits to graves), particularly where they were associated with Catholic doctrines such as saint veneration or purgatorial intercession.

impose obligations, and sometimes require ritual responses. Second, I analyse the emotional and spatial embeddedness of cemeteries, showing how encounters with the dead shape the cemetery. Third, I examine cemetery practices as a means of maintaining relationships with the dead, demonstrating how everyday acts of care and mourning co-produce cemeteries as places of emotional attachment, moral continuity and obligation. Finally, I discuss various nocturnal encounters with the dead, both spontaneous and ritualised, and how these experiences further establish cemeteries as relational places. Ultimately, I consider the broader implications of these findings for understanding how the dead participate in place-making and continue to shape the moral, emotional and spatial lives of the living.

DEATHSCAPES AND CEMETERY

Cemeteries are among the most established and enduring forms of deathscapes, places where the presence of the dead is spatially materialised and socially anchored. As places of burial and remembrance, cemeteries are not merely repositories for the deceased, but active components of the social landscape. They are involved in shaping places, memory and identity, and their spatial and affective organisation reflects broader socio-cultural changes.

The concept of deathscapes refers to the spatial and material manifestations of cultural practices surrounding death as they are embedded in the landscape. As defined by Teather (2001: 185 in Hunter, 2016: 248), deathscapes are “the material expression in the landscape of practice relating to death”. Today, as society becomes more individualized, these places have become increasingly diverse.³ They can include private gardens where ashes are scattered, the sea, forests and other personalized environments. Material and spatial elements such as memorial benches, home shrines (see e.g. Wojtkowiak, Venbrux, 2010), columbaria and roadside memorials (see e.g. Collins, Opie, 2010), illustrate how such landscapes are constructed and constantly reconfigured as deathscapes and memorials. Similarly, Maddrell and Sidaway (2010: 4–5) describe deathscapes as “both the places associated with the dead and for the dead, and how these are imbued with meanings and associations”. In various studies, including that of Hallam and Hockey (2001), deathscapes emerge as important sites of place-making places characterised by social, emotional and material interactions with the dead. Deathscapes include not only burial sites but also dreams, objects, memories etc. that are not necessarily associated with the physical remains of the deceased. Dreams, in particular, function as spaces that extend deathscapes beyond material and geographically fixed locations, becoming spaces where the living and the dead can communicate (see, for example, Ivnik, 2025: 146–148, 150–151).

³ Cemeteries can therefore be understood as socially regulated spaces shaped by shared norms, religious traditions, and collective expectations, as well as sites of highly personal and individual practices. Rather than standing in opposition, my material shows that these dimensions are intertwined: personal relationships with the dead are enacted within socially structured spaces, while individual emotional engagements continuously reshape the lived meaning of the cemetery.

These places fulfil several functions: they are places where people grieve (Maddrell, Sidaway, 2010), care for and remember the dead (Maddrell, 2013), and (re)introduce the dead into the social life of the living. Beyond the marking of death itself, deathscapes are active sites of memory work (Hallam, Hockey, 2001), where the living maintain ongoing relationships with the deceased. This perspective aligns with the continuing bonds model in bereavement studies (Klass et al., 1996), which emphasises the continuity of relationships with significant dead persons rather than their separation.

The concept of deathscapes thus highlights how places associated with death are continually produced through material practices, memories and emotions. Yet to fully understand how cemeteries operate as lived places, it is necessary to look beyond their material and symbolic dimensions and consider the role of the dead themselves. Cemeteries are not only shaped by human practices of remembrance, but also by the ways in which the dead are experienced as present and active. In other words, understanding deathscapes requires us to address the *agency of the dead*, how the dead are perceived to comfort, unsettle or obligate the living, and how such agency informs spatial and ritual practices.

In order to understand how the agency of the dead is articulated in cemeteries, it is first necessary to consider how the dead have typically been represented in scholarship. Folkloristic research has primarily approached narratives about the dead as cultural and social practices through which communities articulate and reinforce their values, norms and identities. Such studies have shown that these narratives contribute to the reaffirmation of group identity and to processes of othering, particularly in relation to other ethnic or religious groups (e.g. Mencej, 2019). Narratives about the dead have been understood as part of a broader body of supernatural narratives that reflect cultural tensions, social change and perceived violations of established norms, with the dead often appearing as agents whose actions contribute to the reassertion of these norms (e.g. Valk, 2006; Raahauge, 2016). Despite these important insights, folkloristics has largely focused on narratives as carriers of collectively shared beliefs and symbolic meanings. Consequently, in comparison with bereavement studies, individual experiences and emotional responses of those affected by these narratives have largely remained in the background (cf. Primiano, 1995). In this article, I do not approach these accounts primarily as folk narratives but rather focus on how the agency of the dead is experienced, enacted and negotiated through everyday spatial and emotional practices at the cemetery by individuals.

Alongside this tradition, anthropological scholarship has often focused on corpses, understood as the material remains of the deceased, or on funerary objects such as coffins, headstones and memorials, which represent or extend the presence of the dead. Corpses have been conceptualised both as sites of identity (Foltyn, 2008) and as media of memory (Hallam, Hockey, 2001). While experiences of the dead are not necessarily tied to physical remains, they are frequently connected to cemeteries as designated burial grounds. Yet the dead are not only conceptualised through their corporeal presence.

Building on Gell's (1998) theory of agency in art and artefacts (Hockey et al., 2010: 9) I argue that the dead and the material objects associated with them, such as tombstones and possessions, extend personhood through human intentionality. Following Latour

(1993), this can be understood as the capacity to exert influence on actions and interactions (Heng, 2020: 404). While discussions of the agency of the corpse (i.e. non-living individuals) are well established, less attention has been given to the agency of spirits; entities perceived as “living” in a non-physical form (Heng, 2020: 404).

My material shows that interlocutors do not primarily locate the agency of the dead in corporeal remains or associated objects, but rather in the perceived presence and intentionality of the dead as relational beings. For instance, people described encounters in which the deceased returned as sensed presences, voices, or visions, offering guidance or demanding attention beyond the physical body or grave. In this sense, cemeteries emerge not only as material deathscapes but also as spiritual ones. Bradbury’s research (1999 in Maddrell, Sidaway, 2010: 64) similarly shows that during her fieldwork in Great Britain, there were very few occasions when anyone explicitly mentioned the bodies buried in the cemetery. This points to a paradox: while the cemetery is materially defined by the burial of bodies, everyday narratives and affective engagements with the dead rarely focus on their physical remains. Instead, the dead are evoked through memory, presence, emotion and place, making them simultaneously present and absent (Hockey, Draper, 2005: 48 in Maddrell, Sidaway, 2010: 62). Yet, as Woodthorpe (2010: 65) notes, by visiting the site of the buried body, people implicitly acknowledge its anchoring role in sustaining the social presence of the deceased.

At the same time, the buried body can be problematic. As Woodthorpe (2010: 67) explains, the body materially and ontologically anchors the cemetery as a place of death, but it is often avoided in everyday practice and narrative, producing discomfort. The buried body both demands recognition and evokes unease: it resists the abstraction typical of memorial parks, where absence is aestheticized. And yet, it is precisely the presence of the buried body that makes a cemetery a cemetery, and not just a memorial garden.

Research on contemporary cemeteries also reveals the importance of the agency of spirits. Francis et al. (2005: 123) note that “many believe that the spirit of the deceased is present at the gravesite and that contact and communication are still possible”, pointing to cemeteries as places encompassing both material and immaterial dimensions. Scholars such as Davies (2010) similarly emphasise the relational and spiritual dimensions of these places. Here, the concept of embodied space (Low, Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003) is useful, as it highlights how human experience and consciousness take material and spatial form. Embodied space refers to the ways in which places are constituted through bodily practices, emotions and sensory engagements, showing that space is not only a physical container but is lived, felt and continually produced through human action and perception. From this perspective, cemeteries are embodied places where encounters with the dead are lived, enacted and spatially grounded.

Drawing on my ethnographic material, I argue that what is at stake is not only the body of the deceased, but also the ongoing spiritual relationship through which the dead continue to engage with the living. In this article, I conceptualise the agency of the dead in three interrelated forms: as emotional agents, eliciting comfort, fear or grief; as moral agents, imposing obligations of care and remembrance; and as ritual agents, guiding and shaping ritual practices. Taken together, these dimensions show that the dead are

not passive figures of memory. They actively shape how the cemetery is used, felt, and understood. Cemeteries are also sites where relational logics is reproduced: loving ties may continue as comforting presences, while unresolved or violent ties persist as haunting disruptions. To capture this, I distinguish between encounters of relational continuity, where bonds of love and care persist after death, and relational disruption, where conflictual or troubling ties resurface in unsettling ways. Furthermore, I differentiate between spontaneous encounters, intentional encounters and ritualized encounters, each of which reflects different modalities of relating to the dead.

RELATIONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH THE DEAD AT THE CEMETERY

The following chapter explores how people perceive and interpret the presence of the dead in cemeteries, focusing on the emotional and spatial significance of these sites. Encounters with the dead are often framed in terms of fear or the uncanny, especially in narratives of hauntings associated with specific places, such as haunted buildings (cf. Mencej, 2015). As Valk (2006: 33) notes, unusual experiences linked to the presence of ghosts – understood as both known dead, such as family members or friends, and unknown dead, often depicted as strangers or “demonised others” – are most likely to occur when people find themselves “in the wrong place at the wrong time” or when they move from familiar, everyday environments into unfamiliar, strange, or potentially dangerous spaces. Similar interpretations are found in accounts of cemeteries (e.g. Lindow, 2018) and church buildings (e.g. Koski, 2018), which are often conceptualised as liminal spaces.

This section focuses on an often-overlooked dimension: the positive, comforting and even desired aspects of these experiences. It highlights how the presence of the dead is felt, and how such affective encounters contribute to the cemetery’s emotional meaning. Particular attention is given to how these encounters, whether spontaneous or intentionally initiated, shape people’s relationships with the dead and influence their spatial and emotional practices within the cemetery.

In their influential work, Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) challenged the Freudian paradigm, which understood mourning as a process of detaching emotional energy from the deceased with the ultimate goal of severing bonds, and introduced the model of *continuing bonds*. This model emphasises that maintaining a relationship with the deceased can be a natural and adaptive way of coping with grief. However, as Klass and colleagues point out, not all bonds are necessarily positive, a point that is often subject to misinterpretation (1996: 72; see also Klass, 2006: 844). My material confirms this observation: the nature of relationships during life may shape their continuation after death. Loving ties persist as comforting presences and sources of moral support (continuities), while conflictual or violent relationships endure as burdensome hauntings that require ritual resolution (disruptions) (see chapter *Nocturnal encounters with the dead*). Although this ethnographic focus is on how such relational logics manifest in cemeteries, these connections are not confined to cemeteries. They also unfold through everyday practices beyond the cemetery, occurring both in other deathscapes such as memorial sites, home shrines,

or places of accidents (see Maddrell, 2013); and in ordinary domestic settings, where the dead are integrated into daily routines (see Walter, 1996; Hallam, Hockey, 2001). I differentiate between everyday practices, such as visiting graves, lighting candles, or speaking to the dead, and ritualized forms of engagement, including blessings, prayers, or vernacular rituals, through which relationships with the dead are collectively structured or formally negotiated.

At this point, it is useful to clarify what is meant by an encounter with the dead. When people talk about the dead, they often describe experiences that feel like direct encounters with the deceased. The phenomenology of such contact is broad and diverse. As Kwilecki (2009: 101) notes, the dead may manifest in many ways: through sensory perceptions (visual apparitions, hearing the voice of the deceased, specific scents, or even tactile impressions), intuitive feelings of presence, or symbolic messages and meaningful synchronicities. Klass and Steffen (2018: 4) further distinguish several modalities of continuing bonds with the dead: the perception of presence, sensory encounters, the conscious incorporation of the deceased's traits into one's own self, and the belief that the dead actively influence thoughts or events (see also Parker, 2005). Other studies describe dream visitations, telepathic messages, or extraordinary experiences that occur in liminal moments (Bennett, 1999). These manifestations are never limitless but shaped by what Raahauge calls a "limited emanation of presence" (2016: 97). They are conditioned by time, space and sensory channels, such that one may, for example, "hear" but not "see" the dead. At the same time, these encounters are not understood as religious phenomena but as deeply relational. Day (2012: 170) proposes the term extraordinary relationality to capture this dimension: the experiences are extraordinary in form, yet ordinary in meaning, since they typically involve loved ones rather than anonymous spirits. Across contexts, what defines these encounters is their relational nature: the dead are not experienced as distant abstractions but as familiar presences who continue to participate in the everyday life of the living. Since the phenomenology of encounters with the dead is broad, I use the term *encounter with the dead* as a broad category that encompasses both feelings of presence and more structured experiences.

Encounter with the Dead

One Sunday morning, I drove an elderly woman from the village to her parish church to attend mass. On the way from her home to the church, we passed through three villages and past no fewer than four cemeteries, including the one where her late husband, children and parents are buried. As we drove past, she made the sign of the cross. When I asked her why she did so, she replied with a laugh, "*To greet them*" (Interlocutor SK009, female, 1930).

Experiences of felt presence demonstrate one modality of the agency of the dead. The feeling of presence is often spontaneous and is not triggered by mediums, rituals or special tools. As Parker (2005: 258) notes, these experiences typically occur "at or after the death of a person known to the bereaved and are interpreted by the bereaved as contact or communication with the deceased". Although Parker focuses on bereaved individuals, this does not mean that those who are not grieving do not have such experiences.

The following example shows how emotionally significant relationships with the deceased affect both individual grief and the experience of the cemetery.

By now I've grown used to cemeteries, and attending funerals no longer feels difficult. I always carry in the back of my mind: "Yes, a person has died, but they still live on". There's this feeling of presence because for me it isn't the end. It would be strange if it were the end. Think of quantum physics and all of that, it's all energy. And you can't destroy energy. How could you? Energy, if it's intelligent enough to hold itself together, must continue on. To destroy it? I don't believe that's possible. Energy always transforms. That's how I see it. Our mind, our consciousness probably evolves too. That's how I imagine it. (Interlocutor SK113, female, 1982, 28.6.2024)

The interlocutor explained that cemeteries had always made her feel uneasy and that she had not encountered death personally for much of her life. Until the death of her stepfather at the age of twenty-seven, she had not experienced a close loss; some neighbours or acquaintances had passed away, but she had not felt a strong connection to them. She attended funerals only rarely and associated visits to the cemetery mainly with All Saints' Day, which she described as a time of gathering and warmth. As she recalled, children would spend hours at the cemetery, lighting white candles, playing among the graves, and admiring the glow that illuminated the entire space. Later, however, her perception changed; the death of her stepfather marked her first profound experience of loss, after which funerals and cemeteries became emotionally difficult and heavy. Only later, when she and her partner, both musicians, began singing at funerals, did she gradually become accustomed to these places and start to perceive them differently: as places where the energy of the dead accumulates and where their presence can be felt.

Studies in bereavement and death studies (e.g. Davies, Shaw, 1995; Klass et al., 1996; Bennett, 1999) indicate that experiences of contact, communication, or felt presence typically occur with close kin or significant others, underlining the relational and affective basis of such encounters. Among various groups for whom death is understood not as a biological end but as a transitional phase in which the dead continue to exist as individuals, spirits are often perceived as carriers of agency. In Maddrell's (2013) work on "memoriscapes", it is noted that the living often perceive the spirits of the deceased as living and capable of action, that is, as entities with whom contact can still be made to receive help or comfort, even if this communication is often only one-way. This line of argument is further developed in Maddrell and Mathijssen (2022), where cemeteries are conceptualised through a spatial lens as lived, relational and processual. They are shown to embody mortal remains, act as focal points for commemoration, and symbolise continuing relationships with the deceased. Cemeteries thus not only reflect religious and cultural geographies, through iconography, spatial organisation, and ritual practices, but also provide places where the living can maintain bonds with the dead, negotiate identities, and materialise beliefs about the afterlife.

In interviews conducted during fieldwork, several widowed interlocutors who have lived alone since the death of their husbands described visiting the grave as a comforting experience and spoke of the cemetery as a place where they feel emotionally uplifted after each visit.

/.../ even better, if you're in trouble, you can talk to them there. (unintelligible – note) ... and I can chat with him [late husband] (laughs – note). You stay for a bit, then you go home, and you feel a little better. (Interlocutor SK001, female, 1944, 31.1.2024)

I go to the cemetery and at least say hello to someone (laughs), and it makes me feel a bit better because I sort of have a little conversation there. (Interlocutor SK055, female, 1952, 26.3.2024)

The cemetery thus becomes a place where widows visit their late husbands, express worries, wishes, or simply ease their loneliness through a sense of continued presence. Both women explained that after their husbands' deaths, they were left living alone, with few (living) people to talk to. More broadly, my field observations suggest that, due to the migration of younger generations to urban areas, many elderly people remain alone in their homes, sometimes as the only residents on their street or, in some cases, among the last inhabitants of the village. The cemetery thus offers a communicative and emotional place where solitude is temporarily suspended through the presence of the dead.

This perspective aligns with studies on continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996), yet extends them beyond the realm of private memory: bonds with the dead are not only internalised recollections but are also spatialised and enacted in the cemetery as a shared cultural space. In this sense, cemeteries operate as *embodied deathscapes* (Woodthorpe, 2010), where ongoing relationships with the deceased are sustained through material gestures, affective presence and communicative practices. As Kwilecki (2009: 101–102) notes, the central function of such communication is not merely evidentiary but therapeutic, offering comfort and continuity to the bereaved through spontaneous encounters that occur independently of ritual specialists or mediators. Although most interlocutors found it difficult to say whether they received a response, one elderly woman told me: *“In my head, I felt he [late husband] said, ‘You’ll be okay’”* (Interlocutor SK001, female, 1944, 31.1.2024).

The way in which people talk to the dead can vary; from speaking aloud to inner conversations, as my next interlocutor told me:

No, I talk to them ... in my mind. “Mum, thank you for giving me life, for bringing me into this world.” I go to the cemetery on her birthday and I tell her that. Yes, physically. And also psychologically, I feel it inside, yes. So I talk to them; I mean, I talk to my mother and father, as well as my godparents and grandparents. The dead hear us. They see us. With their soul. (Interlocutor SK049, male, 1962, 13.3.2024)

However, even if communication takes the form of an inner monologue, this does not diminish the feeling that the deceased are being addressed by these words, and that they really hear them. The deceased are understood as being present in soul, meaning they are not simply absent but occupy another form of presence that allows for ongoing communication and the continued observation of the living. The interlocutor perceives the deceased as sentient and responsive entities who exist in a spiritual form yet remain engaged in this world. Memory becomes an act that occurs at a specific location and time (e.g., a birthday), with a clear emotional structure (e.g., an expression of gratitude). Such practices reinforce the significance of the cemetery as a place in which spiritual ties are materialised.

Seeking Support and Guidance

In contemporary accounts of encounters with the dead, we often find what Bennett (1999) calls the dead as “witnesses”, deceased people who remain actively present in the lives of the living. These are frequently close relatives – parents, children or spouses – whose presence is experienced as supportive rather than frightening. While folk narratives may also recount the return of close relatives, such figures are often embedded in established narrative patterns and moral frameworks, frequently appearing as bearers of warnings or advice. By contrast, in contemporary personal accounts, encounters with the dead are framed primarily as relational and situational experiences, oriented toward help, guidance or emotional support. My ethnographic fieldwork shows that such interactions are not marginal or exceptional but constitute a common and expected dimension of everyday life, as the living frequently turn to the dead – particularly to the known dead⁴ – for guidance and support.

As a family, even though many years have passed, we still visit the cemeteries frequently. My parents divorced, and I became the one who takes care of the grave. My mother helps me a lot, too. My father always goes, he strictly visits the cemetery every Saturday. /.../ Because everyone in the family knows about the bond between me and my [late] grandmother, or rather, my grandparents, it was just that kind of ... I have the feeling that they are somewhere, but I can't find them. I don't know, sometimes I even feel like I need some guidance, their opinions, I feel their presence. But what's interesting is that I'm not afraid. I actually want it. Even when I go to the cemetery, I talk, and I'm never scared. Even if I walk around the whole cemetery and look around a bit, I feel no fear. Why should I? (Interlocutor SK094, female, 1988, 17.5.2024)

It is interesting to note here that the interlocutor repeatedly emphasises that she is not afraid of contact with the dead or visiting the cemetery. This, in a way, reflects the general

⁴ The known dead are deceased individuals with whom a person had a direct, personal relationship during their lifetime, such as relatives, partners, close friends, or other emotionally significant figures.

societal expectations regarding such encounters, expectations she herself does not share. The cemetery thus emerges as a place where the presence of the dead is normalised and integrated into everyday affective life, reaffirming the idea that place-making involves the continued agency of the dead.

In times of difficult life decisions or wishes, the living often turn to the dead at the cemetery to seek advice and support. Through their perceived presence, the dead provide comfort and assist the living in making important decisions or fulfilling their wishes. For example, one interlocutor described how she asked her deceased relatives for help after an argument with her husband when she wished he would call her:

On that 31st of October, when my husband called me, well, that's a holiday for us. I was at home and he was probably at work. I always go to the cemetery on the 31st to take candles, so that the next day I can go up there empty-handed, with just one candle. As I was driving, I kept thinking: Please, universe, help me, let my husband get in touch. Then I arrived at the cemetery. First, I went to the grave of my husband's grandmother, my mother-in-law's mother, and I asked the same thing. Auntie, mum, please help, let Lojzek reach out. That's how I was pleading. Then I drove towards the town [the name of the place has been anonymized] and stopped at the cemetery in the village [the name of the place has been anonymized] and asked again: Mum, dad, tell Lojzek⁵ to call. As I was driving towards the town, just as I reached the village, I saw it on the car screen: Alojz⁶ is calling. What do you say to that? That it was just a coincidence? There's no such thing as coincidence, never. That was the moment. That was the first time he called me, so I could finally hear him. Before, I couldn't hear him. That was the first time. (Interlocutor SK010, female, 1973, 5.2.2024)

The interlocutor went on to explain that she shared this experience with her Lutheran priest, who does not support such practices. However, as the interlocutor noted, she simply stopped discussing these experiences with her priest because the priest had a different opinion. This situation can be understood through the lens of vernacular religion (Primiano, 1995), defined as religion as it is lived and practised in everyday contexts. Lived religion is not a fixed system, but a constantly changing amalgam of official and unofficial ideas and practices, shaped through interaction with others, including both peers and religious authorities. In this case, communication with the dead forms part of the interlocutor's lived religious practice, shaped by personal experience and negotiated in relation to religious authority.

The living turn to the dead not only for comfort but for assistance in real-life challenges. The case also reinforces the emotional logic behind such engagements: the dead

⁵ The name and nickname have been pseudonymized.

⁶ Lojzek is a diminutive form of Alojz. The interlocutor uses both the official name and the nickname in her narrative.

are not imagined as distant ancestors, but as responsive presences who remain embedded in the everyday concerns of the living. Asking the dead for advice in the cemetery and immediately receiving the desired response underscores the intimate affective and spatial dynamics through which the living negotiate relationships with the dead.

Another request for help at the cemetery came from a mother whose son moved away from home, and she asked her late parents to help her son return home:

Interlocutor SK145: *My younger son moved away to live with his girlfriend and wasn't coming back home. I cried a lot and went to the cemetery. I broke down and cried: "Dad and Mum, please help me. My child ... my son has left." The next morning at eight, this is what happened, well, not exactly eight, my husband had already gone to work, precisely at half past five, and my [late] father came. I heard him and I saw him. How can I explain this to you in Slovenian, how it works ... like a ghost. He knocked, and I saw his face, so I got up. He knocked on the bedroom door and called out, not Dragica, but Draga. He used to call me Draga, and I saw his face, so I got up and shouted: "What is it, Dad?" And then I didn't see him anymore. I saw him as clearly as I see you now. But that was a ghost. Do you understand? I saw his face so clearly. And I responded, I shouldn't have, they say, but it startled me. I said: "What is it, Dad?" And I cried so much afterwards. I still see his face in my dreams.*

SK: *What happened to your son? You had asked your late father to help you, right?*

Interlocutor SK145: *What happened is that everything was resolved. The boy didn't dare come home, but after I cried and broke down, it was sorted out in a good way right away. (Interlocutor SK145, female, 1952, 18.11.2024)*

The narrator's emotional breakdown at the cemetery, addressed to her deceased parents, initiates a sequence that culminates in what she experiences as a direct response from her late father. The appearance of her father – his voice, his face, and even his characteristic way of addressing her – serves as a moment of intense affective and sensory confirmation of his continued presence. What is significant here is the relational logic of the encounter. The living seeks emotional and practical support from the deceased during a time of distress, and the deceased responds in a way that restores agency and resolves the problem. The perceived ghostly appearance is seen as comforting, familiar and meaningful, although she cried a lot afterwards.

The cemetery thus functions as an efficacious place for activating these bonds, as a site of consultation and care where the living turn to the dead for support.

Ritual Communication with the Dead

Spatially, cemeteries – along with other death-related or emotionally significant locations, such as places where someone died or is buried, as well as sites associated with memory, labour, or affection – can activate or reveal the agency of the dead. Two foundational

aspects of studying spatial perception and the social dimensions of landscape are temporality (Ingold, 1993) and transformability (Bender, 1993). Temporally, encounters are often associated with liminal moments – transitional periods within daily, annual, or life cycle rhythms – such as nighttime, All Saints' Day (1 November), the anniversary of death, or funerals. Cemeteries are also places where the living bid farewell to the dead in a ritual sense. Funerals are particularly interesting moments for observation in this regard. On such occasions, the sense of the presence of the dead is often intensified. One of my interlocutors described her experience at her mother's funeral as follows:

During the funeral, when a certain song was playing, I had this strange experience. Our social worker later asked me: "What were you looking at up there? What caught your attention?" And honestly, I don't even know. I just remember feeling something at that moment, as if something was happening above me. The clouds had formed into the shape of angel wings, and I kept looking up, trying to understand what it meant. Afterwards, people at the funeral said: "What were you doing? You seemed to sense something, you were pointing at something." I can't explain it. But I truly felt some kind of energy because my mother and I were very close. I couldn't grasp what had happened to her, so I went to speak to this woman [the social worker]. While we were talking, she told me: "Pay attention to these signs." (Interlocutor SK052, female, 1978, 25.3.2025)

Although the interlocutor does not say it explicitly, it is clear that she felt the presence of her deceased mother. The social worker also confirmed to her that these were signs from her mother. The interlocutor explained that what made the experience so unusual was precisely the sense of her mother's comforting presence during the funeral, something she deeply needed at that moment. Her perception of a particular *energy*, the symbolic interpretation of the clouds as angel wings, and the feeling of being in an intensified emotional and sensory state all point to such an experience. In the interlocutor's case, the strong emotional bond with her mother continues after death and, in the liminal moment of the funeral, is realised as a comforting presence.

Other interlocutors described similar signs on the day of the funeral; for example, the morning light had a special, positive and calming quality, which they interpreted as a sign of the deceased's presence. These experiences are often understood as spiritual or affective interactions with the deceased that provide comfort to the bereaved, reaffirm their relational bonds or give them meaning. In some cases, the presence of the dead at the cemetery during a funeral is interpreted as a warning, particularly when the deceased's last wishes are perceived as having been ignored. One interlocutor explained that a deceased neighbour "made herself known" through a thunderstorm and heavy rain during the funeral, which she linked to the fact that the neighbour's wish to be buried in a coffin rather than cremated had not been respected by her children.

These examples point to how funerary moments intensify people's engagement with the dead at the cemetery. The dead thus emerge as participants in ritual communication; agents who comfort, admonish, or reassert their presence.

SPATIAL PRACTICES AS RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE: CARE AND OBLIGATION

Care

Cemetery activities performed on a regular basis, such as cleaning, planting flowers, watering them and lighting candles are described not only as duties, but as ways of maintaining a connection with the dead and serve to affirm the living's own position within local moral geographies. This section further unpacks how the agency of the dead manifests through embodied care and place-based practice.

People I spoke with often explained that they tended graves for the sake of their deceased loved ones. Caring for the grave, they said, was a way of expressing gratitude and affection, showing that they had cared for them in life and did not forgotten them in death. Grave maintenance, then, is also a moral and emotional practice that reaffirms relational ties, distributes familial responsibility, and allows the living to participate in a meaningful dialogue with the dead. As one interlocutor put it:

The two of us feel quite connected to our deceased. The graves, I'm from [anonymized village name] that's where they're all buried. My grandmother and grandfather, as well as my mother and father, they still have their graves and headstones, and we still take care of them. Whereas for my great-grandfather and great-grandmother, we've let that go. But we still maintain things, cleaning, planting flowers, and lighting candles. Not just on 1 November; we come and take care of things there all year round. We water the flowers, for example. Basically, we take care of it. (Interlocutor SK035, male, 1949, 4.3.2024)

Acts such as weeding the grave, bringing seasonal flowers, or replacing a candle are performed not just out of social obligation or tradition, but with the sense that the deceased “see”, “know”, or even “feel” this care. In many cases, people describe these acts in relational terms; for example, “*she [the late mother] would have liked this flower*”. Through such ongoing care, the dead remain part of the family or community, and the cemetery becomes a place of continued connection.

One female interlocutor told me how, just before my arrival, she had gone for a walk in the woods and gathered a small bouquet of snowdrops. Later that day, she carried them to her mother's grave, explaining that snowdrops had always been her mother's favourite flowers. Another interlocutor recalled how the blooming of daffodils in early spring unfailingly reminded him of his late mother. Each year, he would gather a bunch

and carry them to her grave, repeating a gesture he had often performed while she was still alive: *“I liked picking flowers and bringing them to her [when she was still alive]. And every time I go to the cemetery, I remember her and bring a bouquet of daffodils”* (Interlocutor SK030, male, 1943, 28.2.2024).

Grave care appears as a daily or weekly activity, not limited to ritual occasions. It is not framed merely as respect or care, but also as an obligation, sometimes explicitly described as a “duty to the dead”. People explain these acts as fulfilling a promise, expressing love, or ensuring that the deceased are not forgotten or abandoned.

Yes, now the two of us take care of our two graves, then two graves of some neighbours, and the grave of a woman who is buried here. My daughter was still young when she carried the cross for her. We take care of these people because she asked me, she had no children. I had just given birth to my children one after another, with only 15 months between them. My husband was working, we had no grandparents to help, and we were cultivating the field. That woman felt sorry for me and often came to help. “I’ll work in the field for you, and you just take care of the babies”, she’d say. And we gave her a respectful burial here, and took care of everything. And back then, she asked me: “If I don’t have anyone, could you at least plant a flower on my grave?” And we’ve kept our promise ever since, for as long as we are able. When we are no longer able, we’ll put gravel instead of soil on the grave. She has a beautiful gravestone, which she had made beforehand, and that’s how it is. But we take care of it. (Interlocutor SK097, female, 1956, 18.5.2024)

This case shows that grave care is not limited to kin. It can also arise from reciprocity, moral obligation, and promises made during life. The interlocutor and her husband not only tend their family graves but also those of neighbours and a deceased woman who once helped her during a difficult period in her life. Her promise to “at least plant a flower” on that woman’s grave has become a long-term affective commitment, reflecting a moral and emotional bond rooted in mutual aid and gratitude. Read through the lens of reciprocity, as discussed by Mencej (2025: 346) in relation to medieval and early modern European communities, such relationships reveal a continuity of exchange between the living and the dead. In those contexts, moral relations were structured around balancing what Mencej describes as the “gifts of the dead to the living, such as life, property, and personal identity”, which were considered so substantial that they posed a threat to the recipients unless they were offset by counter-gifts of equivalent value (2025: 346). In my case, grave tending becomes both an affective gesture of gratitude and a moral return. As Mencej observes, the dead become persons and partners in reciprocal relations with living human beings (2025: 366–367).

The interlocutors generally emphasised that caring for graves is primarily a form of care, a continuation of a relationship, often also regarded as a moral duty. One woman, whom I also interviewed, had lived with an abusive husband and continued to visit his

grave after his death. When I asked her why she tended his grave despite the fact that he had behaved violently, she admitted that she felt relief after his passing, as she was no longer subjected to physical abuse. Still, she believed it was right, as a wife, to maintain his grave because it was expected of her. Other female interlocutors, however, expressed the opposite view: for them, their husband's death marked the definitive end of a violent relationship, and they therefore ceased caring for his grave. This can be understood as a form of liberation, not only from the violence itself but also from the social norms traditionally imposed on women, which I will discuss further in a following subchapter.

Obligation

Although most of my interlocutors spoke of grave care as a continuation of a relationship with the deceased, my observation of village life revealed that communal expectations regarding the appearance of graves also play a significant role in these practices. One morning, I joined an elderly woman as she tended the graves in her care – those of her husband, her deceased children, and her parents. Maintaining three graves was a considerable burden for her, and during the work she often complained that her daughter-in-law offered no help. That same day, a funeral was taking place in the cemetery, and upon returning home, the daughter-in-law remarked that she had cleaned the graves precisely so that the mourners would not think her graves were “neglected”. In this context, graves function almost as extensions of household gardens – spaces that must be kept tidy not only for the sake of personal remembrance but also to meet the expectations of neighbours and the wider community. However, this expectation that graves must always be tidy is relatively recent:

There are holidays, anniversaries, Sundays. Look, when I was growing up /.../ people didn't go to light candles regularly. They would light them on All Saints' Day. Later, they began lighting them for birthdays, holidays, Christmas ... But nowadays, if you drive past a cemetery in the evening, everything is lit up. If people hear there's going to be a funeral tomorrow, they'll light a bunch of candles today because they go to light candles for their own deceased too. (Interlocutor SK016, male, 1962, 10.2.2024)

A similar sense of obligation is imposed by local authorities, for example through the payment of grave rent. If this is not paid, abandoned graves are removed after a certain period. A representative of the local authorities explained:

We consider the cemetery and the mourning house to be very important and highly visible spaces. If they are not well maintained, it creates a negative impression for outsiders. By the way, I attended a funeral last week [in Hungary], near the border, my friend passed away. I must say that the cemetery in [anonymized name of the town] is very poorly maintained. (Interlocutor SK038, male, 1961, 6.3.2024)

A well-maintained cemetery can also reflect how well a community functions, indicating the role of the municipality as a political and administrative structure responsible for the care and maintenance of communal space. Local funeral services also play a significant role, often taking inspiration from practices across the border in Austria:⁷

That used to bother me, cemeteries left untended, overgrown with grass. They used to clean them only once a year, if at all, and that was at the end of October, on Reformation Day, a public holiday when people didn't work at home but went to clean the cemeteries before All Saints' Day. It was a tradition: on 31 October, the cemeteries were cleaned. /.../ Today, they are much better maintained. (Interlocutor SK016, male, 1962, 10.2.2024)

Public and religious holidays, such as All Saints' Day (1 November), also play an important role in shaping the rhythm of cemetery care. On this day, people across the region clean and decorate graves, while local leaders often organise communal work initiatives during which villagers volunteer to mow the grass and maintain shared areas of the cemetery. Thus, grave care can be seen both as a collective activity shaped by the influence of local authorities, the church and village communities, and as an individual practice motivated by personal feelings of care, the continuation of a relationship, or a moral sense of duty.

At the same time, the intensity of (grieving) emotions can also disrupt these practices. The interlocutor's inability to visit the grave after her mother's sudden death reflects how intense emotions can reshape spatial practices.

At the beginning, when it happened, it was very, very hard for me to go, because even afterwards it still hurt a lot. I remember standing by the grave, and by the time I drove home, I was completely in tears, so sad. At the beginning, I didn't want to go at all. Deep down I knew she was gone, but it was hard to accept that she was truly no longer there. Well, now I do go, for example on All Saints' Day or on the anniversary of her death, but at that time, my daughter and my son, and others like my husband went instead. I think my husband even goes every day to light a candle. (Interlocutor SK050, female, 1975, 13.3.2024)

⁷ In the Slovenian context, comparisons with neighbouring countries are frequent and culturally significant. Austria often serves as a positive reference point for standards of development, progress and infrastructure, particularly in border regions with long-standing historical, economic and everyday cross-border ties. Such comparisons do not necessarily imply idealisation, but rather provide a locally shared framework for assessing change and improvement. By contrast, in the region where my fieldwork was conducted, Hungary serves as an alternative reference point. The region was occupied and annexed by Hungary during the Second World War, and prior to the First World War it formed part of the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These historical experiences continue to shape local memories and comparative imaginaries, in which Hungary is often invoked as a negative reference associated with political domination, isolation and perceived economic stagnation, especially in contrast to Austria.

The difficult period following the death of her mother prevented the interlocutor from visiting the cemetery for some time. The presence of the dead mother is experienced so intensely that entering the cemetery triggers crying, sadness and emotional distress for my interlocutor. In this case, the cemetery can be understood as a site of transformation, where through practices of care – as well as their temporary suspension – a new relationship with the deceased mother is gradually formed. While the interlocutor does not explicitly frame this process as a transformation, the shifting pattern of presence, absence, and selective visitation suggests a gradual reconfiguration of her relationship with the deceased and the cemetery. This is not simply mourning as an internal psychological process, but a spatial-relational dynamic in which emotions, bodily reactions, and practices of visitation intertwine, making the cemetery a place where the presence of the dead is felt. This example also shows that the relationship with the deceased is not static; the agency of the dead is evident in the very fact that the person is “not yet ready” for contact. The cemetery thus emerges as a place of internal preparation, transformation, and the gradual re-establishment of relational bonds. An important dimension here is also the collective distribution of care: the husband, children, and the interlocutor each maintain a relationship with the deceased mother in different ways and at different rhythms. The practice of caring for the dead reveals family dynamics in which responsibility, emotional readiness, and modes of connection to the deceased differ. This is a collective, but not uniform experience.

The emotional experience of the presence of the deceased person in the grave produces the experience of the absence of the living person. The cemetery is not a place where the deceased simply “rest in peace”, but a place where they are felt in various ways, including as a painful absence that has not yet been fully integrated. This tension resonates with the concept of *absence-presence* (see Maddrell, 2013), which highlights how the connection with the deceased is enacted not only through inner memory but also as through material and spatial practices driven by emotions and ritual habits (Maddrell, 2013). The cemetery is thus not only the resting place of the body but a place where the bereaved gradually activates a new form of presence, a relationship that cannot yet be fully acknowledged or integrated, but which is nonetheless felt and maintained.

NOCTURNAL ENCOUNTERS WITH THE DEAD

In the village where I stayed during my fieldwork, I often went for evening walks. Whenever I met someone near the cemetery, which lay along my route, they would ask whether I was not afraid to pass by it at night. For a time, I also parked my car in the lot beside the cemetery, not wanting to crowd my hosts’ yard. After a few days, however, my host asked why I had left it there and advised me not to keep it overnight near the cemetery, adding that the national border was close by and that all sorts of things can happen during the night. Such remarks suggest a shared unease: cemeteries are places people prefer to avoid after dark. Few explained precisely why, but the implication was always that it was “better not to go there”. A woman, whom I also interviewed, had moved

to a neighbouring village ten years earlier and expressed something similar. Her new home stands next to the cemetery, a location she admits she has never grown used to. Even now, she told me, it leaves her with a strange, unsettling feeling, especially at night.

Spontaneous Encounter

Spontaneous encounters with the dead are unplanned moments in which the presence of the deceased is felt rather than consciously sought. Unlike intentional encounters, such as those described in the section *Seeking Support and Guidance*, these experiences occur unexpectedly, often without ritual mediation or deliberate intent. One example of such a spontaneous *negative* encounter with an unknown dead⁸ in the cemetery at night is described in the account of my interlocutor's mother:

SK: *How do you feel about spaces such as cemeteries?*

Interlocutor SK113: *I don't like cemeteries.*

SK: *You don't?*

Interlocutor SK113: *No, I don't feel good there. It's like there's some kind of negative energy. (laughs)*

SK: *Has anything ever happened to you there, or is it just a feeling?*

Interlocutor SK113: *It's more of a feeling, like the air is heavy, saturated with some kind of weight. But something did happen to my mother. After my stepfather died, she went to the cemetery every day. It made her feel better somehow. Once, she went there quite late, I think it was around New Year's Eve, close to midnight, and as she was leaving, she felt as if someone was walking behind her. (laughs) She ran home quickly!*

SK: *But not your [late] father?*

Interlocutor SK113: *Apparently someone else. Because if it had been my [late] father, it would have felt good. She said, "I'll never go to the cemetery at midnight again!" (laughs) When my father died, she didn't want to go to any more funerals. And neither did I. You distance yourself from cemeteries and funerals because it's already heavy enough, you're always reminded of your own [loss]. But life eventually leads you back, you have to go. (Interlocutor SK113, female, 1982, 28.6.2024)*

Often, in negative spontaneous encounters, the deceased were unknown; that is, individuals whom my interlocutors were unable to identify. The interlocutor also emphasised that the experience would have been positive had it involved contact with her deceased father, that is, with a known dead person.

The following case describes a nocturnal encounter in the cemetery with deceased neighbours who were considered to have been witches during their lifetimes.

⁸ Unknown dead refers to deceased individuals who are not personally known to the living and with whom no prior relationship exists.

Interlocutor SK145: *I really do not know how to explain it well ... you can't hear it right now, but black magic does something, it takes away your strength, you lose your health, you don't feel well in the house, you can't sleep ... something is done to you. But you have to cleanse it.*

SK: *And are these witches buried here in the cemetery?*

Interlocutor SK145: *They are, they are.*

SK: *And do you know where they are?*

Interlocutor SK145: *Of course, they were our neighbours.*

SK: *And does anything happen around there?*

Interlocutor SK145: *No, no ... but people always say that at midnight in the cemetery, you get this strange feeling. Now I'm scared, I don't go there anymore.*

SK: *You don't? Did you go once?*

Interlocutor SK145: *I did, once, at eleven o'clock [in the evening]. I went up there, and you know what, it was so quiet, and something was happening. Just as I'm telling you, there was this kind of mist all around me, and a wind started blowing around me, and I looked around, and things were happening ... strange sounds, very quiet, whispering. The wind was carrying that mist. Uff, I shivered and ran away, I'm not going to the cemetery again [in the evening].* (Interlocutor SK145, female, 1952, 18.11.2024)

Here, when speaking about the deceased neighbours whom villagers regarded as witches, the interlocutor understood this social category as inherently negative, along with the negative traits and abilities these women were believed to possess. She explicitly linked her negative experience to the fact that they were considered witches. It is also important to note that she was not referring to a particular individual, but rather to a broader social category of deceased women labelled as witches.⁹ The agency of the unknown dead thus manifests through unsettling experiences, particularly at night in the cemetery. Such encounters evoke feelings of fear or unease and reinforce the perception that cemeteries are places to be avoided after dark.

From Spontaneous to Ritualised Encounter

The following examples illustrate not so much a spontaneous encounter with the dead as a deliberate practice carried out in the cemetery, a place where the presence of the dead is expected and where contact can be intentionally initiated. The nocturnal encounter with the dead in the cemetery reveals two key elements that are interwoven in the narrative: fear of the cemetery as a place associated with the supernatural, and the procedures for confronting the influence of the dead on the living – when visiting the cemetery and confronting the dead are indeed desirable – as they may allow the living to free themselves from the

⁹ In many communities, including rural Slovenia (see Mencej, 2017), “witches” are a socially recognised category – people discussed and marked by specific moral, social, and often gendered meanings. These individuals do not necessarily identify as witches; rather, the community categorises them as such based on gossip, suspicion, or particular behaviours.

presence of the haunting dead. One of my interlocutors emphasised how she faced up to this fear and, in doing so, broke the bond with her deceased husband. This act was not framed as an uninvited haunting, but as a necessary step toward reclaiming agency and closing a traumatic chapter. The cemetery thus functioned as a ritual landscape – emotionally charged, socially significant, and spiritually active – where communication with the dead was not only possible but expected as part of the healing process.

Interlocutor SK145: *One of my friends had a husband who used to walk with her a lot, but then he started threatening her badly, beating her, and saying she wouldn't get his pension because he would come to haunt her at home [after his death]. And he did, every evening, he would stand by her bed. She saw him; she saw his whole figure, standing right by her bed. She asked for help in spiritual ways. At that time, there was Ernest [a Protestant priest], after her husband passed away, he said ...*

/.../

SK: *And did he help with this?*

Interlocutor SK145: *Yes, he told her she had to go to [his] grave in the evening and scold him. She should throw everything at him, tell him: "You are there, I am here. Leave my life alone, and I'll give you peace." She did that, after she lit a candle. She said she didn't even know how she made it back from the cemetery, she was limping so badly.*

SK: *And the priest advised her to do that?*

Interlocutor SK145: *Yes, he advised her. They know how to deal with this. Everything can be cleansed. If you're caught in black magic, you have no luck, you suffer, you're ill, something is happening, and you go to these bioenergetics people, they tell you that you have black magic on you. It can be cleared, but it costs money. You've never heard of that before, have you? Well, now you'll remember. /.../*

SK: *Do you think this also has an effect, for example, when people are in conflict and don't do what the other person wanted?*

Interlocutor SK145: *It does, it does, it does. You remember how I told you about the neighbour and her mother, her mother threatened her: "When I die, I won't leave you in peace." And that husband threatened his wife too. She opened her eyes and saw him. She opened her eyes again and didn't see him, and when she opened them once more, he was gone. And then she asked the priest, she looked into everything and sorted it out. Those priests, they know a lot. They are trained for this; they have to know all of it. And if you turn to them when you have these problems, they know how to advise you. (Interlocutor SK145, female, 1952, 18.11.2024)*

The case of the haunting husband illustrates what might be considered an unpleasant form of continuing bonds (see Klass et al., 1996: 72; Klass, 2006: 844) in which the relationship with the dead is neither comforting nor positive. In such instances, the living

must actively perform a ritual at the grave in order to sever or transform the tie. The interlocutor's mention of fear, the ritual confrontation and the bodily consequences – *limping in the cemetery* – emphasise the affective and physical intensity of such experiences. This example shows that the relationship with the dead is not always benign or comforting; it can be unsettling, even physically disturbing. The ritual act advised by the priest: visiting the grave, reprimanding the deceased and lighting a candle, may serve as a symbolic form of closure, functioning as a vernacular exorcism. Importantly, this act is not merely spontaneous but vernacularly guided, with the priest – unusually for the Protestant tradition – playing a crucial role as a ritual specialist who bridges the gap between Christian and vernacular cosmology. The role of the priest is particularly interesting and contradictory. As a Lutheran clergyman, he represents institutional religion, but his advice resonates with local vernacular religion, illustrating the intertwining of official religious and vernacular epistemologies, where the boundaries between formal theology and vernacular practice are fluid rather than fixed. The narrative moves seamlessly from ghostly visitations to black magic, bioenergetics and spiritual cleansing, all as part of a continuum of spiritual suffering and healing. This illustrates how the dead, spiritual harm and misfortune are conceptually linked in vernacular ontologies. The mention of “bioenergetics” and “cleansing” suggests what Hamilton (2000) calls a “pick-and-mix religion” in which various actors (priests, healers, energy practitioners) offer different explanations and solutions.

The ghostly husband, who continues to violently threaten his wife even after death, exemplifies a dynamic in which male authority and violence extend beyond the grave, thereby inviting a gendered reading. The woman must perform a ritual of empowerment in order to regain control and sever the bond. This opens up the analysis of domestic hauntings as gendered power struggles in which the dead male figure retains coercive power, and the widow must perform a kind of resistance. As Koski (2018: 62) argues, ritualisation is often necessary in liminal, transformative processes, whether in gendered relationships, in interactions between humans and the natural world, or at the boundary between the living and the dead.

The case demonstrates how the perceived agency of the dead can manifest as a form of unresolved conflict, and how the cemetery provides a spatial framework for addressing this. It also highlights the entanglement of institutional religion and vernacular practice, with the priest acting not just as a Christian authority but as a local ritual specialist navigating between cosmologies. Furthermore, the gendered dimension of posthumous haunting points to how power imbalances in life may continue after death, requiring ritual resolution. Here, the cemetery becomes a stage for confrontation, healing and the renegotiation of relational boundaries between the living and the dead. Below is another example similar to the first, except that in this case a Catholic priest was involved.

Interlocutor SK093: *You know ... when my husband died, may God punish me if I'm lying, it's no wonder we didn't really get along. He had already been buried for three months. One evening, I wasn't feeling well, so I lay down on the couch for a while. I dozed off, and then suddenly, he came ...*

and he started pulling the blanket off me. I thought, what is this now? It went on like that for almost four months. Then I went to the priest and told him what was happening to me. And let anyone say this isn't real! I tried everything, but I never would've imagined it. You could even see a shadow where he was standing. You could feel it directly. Then the priest came and blessed the whole apartment. We also went to the cemetery, where we have a family tomb, and he sprinkled holy water there too. After that, some time passed, and nothing happened anymore. But you have no idea what torment I went through.

SK: *Why do you think he was doing that?*

Interlocutor SK093: *I don't know why. But a lot of people say this happens.*

SK: *What did the priest say?*

Interlocutor SK093: *The priest said: "This is how it is, the way you live with someone, how they treat you, how you treat them ... that's how it continues." But ... I don't know. I said to myself: Look at what's happening to me. And my neighbour in [neighbouring village]. Her husband died when they were in the forest collecting firewood. He was on the cart, fell into the pile and died. And when I told her what was happening to me, she said the same thing had happened to her. "I went through the same", she told me. And it's not just one case, there are many. And people say that when you come home, you can really feel that shadow or something ... I never would have imagined it. (Interlocutor SK093, female, 1953, 17.5.2024)*

In both cases, the nocturnal visit to the cemetery was intentional, as it was believed that only at night could the relationship with the dead be resolved and the haunting brought to an end. The timing was therefore just as important as the ritual itself. In both examples, the deceased in question were known to the living and the encounter with them was not interpreted as supernatural, but as a necessary act that enabled the living to carry on with their lives. Even if the encounter was upsetting at first, it had a positive long-term effect as it brought emotional release and liberation. It is noteworthy that in both cases the ritual was initiated or instigated by priests, emphasising the role of religious authority in guiding these practices. The nocturnal setting was a crucial element as it enhanced the intentionality of the encounter and allowed for a more direct confrontation with the dead. Thus, the cemetery at night becomes an unsettling place intended only for certain individuals under specific conditions.

Warnings against visiting cemeteries at night are not uncommon. Such cautionary behaviour reflects broader cultural understandings of these places. In numerous folk narratives, as Koski (2018) describes, cemeteries and churchyards at night become places where the worlds of the living and the dead intersect – but never without consequence. Sacredness intensifies at night, and the marked otherness of these places becomes more pronounced. As scholars have noted, no place is sacred in and of itself; it becomes sacred through people's actions, ritual behaviour, and collective understandings (Bossuyt, 2005; Hamilton, Spicer, 2005; Koski, 2018: 55). Through these rituals, cemeteries are shaped as

contested yet transformative places, where fear, conflict and ritualized resolution together articulate the enduring agency of the dead in structuring spatial and emotional life.

CONCLUSION

Cemeteries in north-eastern Slovenia are not only sites of burial and remembrance but also landscapes in which the dead act as emotional, moral and ritual agents. Approached as deathscapes, they emerge through narratives, gestures of care, and situated practices such as grave tending, lighting candles, prayer, communication, or confrontation. These acts do not simply express emotion. They also shape the cemetery as a place where relationships with the dead are maintained, changed, or sometimes brought to an end. The paper distinguishes between *relational continuities*, in which comforting presences extend intimacy and care, and *relational disruptions*, in which troubling hauntings demand ritual resolution. In both cases, cemeteries are shaped by the interplay of official and vernacular religion: priests act as ritual specialists within local cosmologies, while everyday practices of address and interpretation reinforce the agency of the dead in communal life. Conceptually, this article reframes the *continuing bonds* grief model by situating relationships with the dead in place-based practice, showing that bonds persist in embodied and spatial encounters. It extends scholarship that has focused on corpses and funerary artefacts, demonstrating how spirits themselves are perceived as co-producers of place.

Across the three thematic sections, cemeteries appear as places of complex relationality between the living and the dead. *Relational encounters* encompasses spontaneous, intentional, or ritualised forms of engagement in which the deceased provide comfort, guidance, support or reassurance to the living, most often involving the known dead. *Spatial practices* highlight the moral and social dimensions of care: tending graves expresses ongoing relational continuity and obligation towards the dead, yet it is also shaped by communal expectations regarding order and respectability. *Nocturnal encounters* introduce a different affective register: spontaneous meetings with the unknown dead evoke fear or unease, whereas intentional ones, often linked to broken bonds, can bring eventual release or transformation.

Taken together, cemeteries emerge as moral and emotional landscapes where the agency of the dead unfolds along multiple axes: between known and unknown dead, and between everyday care and ritual confrontation. The dead act as emotional agents who comfort or unsettle, as moral agents who impose obligations, and as spatial agents who help constitute cemeteries as communicative places. Encounters with the dead often arise when the living are in need, seeking consolation, guidance, or reconciliation. Such appearances are relationally activated rather than random, reaffirming cemeteries as spaces of reciprocity and negotiation. Plural and ambivalent, they are tranquil by day yet uncanny at night.

Understanding cemeteries as processual, relational places invites scholars and practitioners to rethink design, maintenance, and ritual provision not as static amenities but as supports for ongoing relations. This perspective also extends beyond the cemetery: similar spatial logics appear in home shrines and memorials (see e.g. Wojtkowiak, Venbrux, 2010),

dreamscapes (see e.g. Ivnik, 2025), roadside memorials (see e.g. Collins, Opie, 2010) and other natural settings in which the dead are sensed and addressed. Attending to these *geographies of presence* helps explain how communities negotiate loss, relationship, belonging and memory, and how the dead continue to participate in the making of place and the shaping of the emotional and moral life of the living.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The article is based on research data stored in the author's personal archive, which will be deposited later this year in the Social Science Data Archives (ADP – Arhiv družboslovnih podatkov; <https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/>), where it will be accessible, to a limited extent, for scientific and research purposes only.

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MRTVI KOT USTVARJALCI PROSTORA: POKOPALIŠČA KOT ČUSTVENI, MORALNI IN RITUALNI PROSTORI

Članek obravnava pokopališča v severovzhodni Sloveniji kot pokrajine smrti, v katerih umrli delujejo kot čustveni, moralni in ritualni akterji. Na podlagi desetmesečnega etnografskega terenskega dela, izvedenega leta 2024 v 24 vaseh, članek analizira, kako se odnosi z umrlimi ohranjajo, preoblikujejo ali prekinjajo skozi prostorske prakse, afektivne izkušnje in ritualna dejanja. Posebna pozornost je namenjena obiskovanju grobov, urejanju pokopališč, prižiganju sveč, pogovorom z umrlimi ter izkušnjam njihove prisotnosti. Članek pokaže, da pokopališča delujejo kot kraji kontinuiranih vezi, kjer živi iščejo tolažbo, oporo, nasvete ali razrešitev nerešenih odnosov. Hkrati pa nekatere izkušnje, zlasti nočna srečanja in pripovedi o motečih umrlih, razkrivajo tudi neprijetne razsežnosti teh vezi, kjer se nerešeni odnosi raztezajo onkraj smrti in zahtevajo ritualno posredovanje. Na pojmovni ravni članek na novo opredeli model kontinuiranih vezi (ang. *continuing bonds model*) skozi prostorsko perspektivo ter pokaže, da vezi z umrlimi ne vztrajajo le v spominu, temveč tudi v utelešenih, krajevno umeščenih praksah. S tem prispevek razširja razumevanje *deathscapes*, saj v ospredje postavlja delovanje umrlih pri oblikovanju pokopališč kot večplastnih, ambivalentnih in čustveno nabitih prostorov v središču vaškega življenja.