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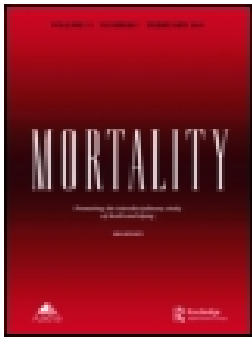
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Transforming bonds: ritualising post-mortem relationships in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

People continue relationships with their dead in a variety of ways. Since the 1990s, the idea of 'continuing bonds' has provided a framework for exploring and understanding post-mortem relationships. However, the dynamics of the bonds between the living and the dead have received little attention. By looking at the intersection of things, practices and spaces, this paper demonstrates that expressions of continuing bonds do not always point to continuity, and indeed can signify discontinuity. It explores the 'transforming bonds' between the recently bereaved and their deceased in the Netherlands, illustrating how post-mortem relationships change and how such changes affect the social location of the deceased and the bereaved. By attending to the ritual dynamics of separation, transition and integration, two aspects of the social and material relationships between the living and the dead are highlighted. First, attention is given to the ways wherein the bereaved relocate their deceased through material objects within and outside of their homes, enabling them to renegotiate the absence–presence of the deceased. Second, the paper illustrates that personalised incorporation practices are inevitably linked to negotiations and contestations in the social sphere, and the norms and values of the social environment.

Introduction

People continue to have bonds with their dead in various tangible ways. They continue to celebrate anniversaries through which the dead grow old and marriages endure. In public and private spaces, the dead are made present and become the topic of or partner in conversations. Such ongoing relationships are by no means new, but have long been ignored by a modernist, psychological framework. In the 1990s, this began to change and today, the continuing bonds paradigm has become a dominant way of understanding bereavement. Although many have argued for exploring the dynamics of continuing bonds (Howarth, 2000; Klass, 2006; Valentine, 2008), little attention has been given to the ways in which the

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bereaved alter their relationship with the deceased. At the present time, this is overshadowed not by a modernist approach, but by a focus on the ongoing presence of the dead (Jonsson, 2015). However, what is often taken to be an expression of continuing bonds in academic literature does not always point to continuity. Rather, it may signify discontinuity and change. By focusing on the ritual dynamics of separation, transition, and integration in post-mortem relationships (Van Gennep, 1909/1960), the paper illustrates that the bereaved gradually transform their bond with the deceased, to (re)negotiate his or her 'absence–presence' (Maddrell, 2013). Looking at relationships between the living and the dead from a ritual perspective, I argue, provides valuable insight into the social and material lives of continuing bonds.

This paper explores the 'transforming bonds' between Dutch bereaved and their deceased, demonstrating some of the ways wherein post-mortem relationships change, and how this transforms the social location of the deceased and the bereaved (Turner, 1969). After drawing attention to the theoretical concepts of breaking, continuing and transforming bonds and the methods of this study (§2–§4), I explore the relationships between the living and the dead by looking at practices involving objects belonging to the deceased (§5), and ash-objects (§6). The diverse ways in which people handle objects related to their dead will be examined in non-institutionalised spaces, both within and outside of the home. Attention will also be given to the collective dimensions of highly individualised relationships between the living and the dead (§7). The paper concludes with some final remarks, highlighting how a ritual perspective stimulates thinking about continuing bonds as a process of negotiation in which the bereaved separate, relocate and integrate the deceased in their ordinary lives (§8).

Breaking, continuing and transforming bonds

Relationships between the living and the dead have been the subject of scholarly conversation throughout the twentieth century. During this period, most academic, professional and religious discourses in the West stressed the stark and solid boundaries between the living and the dead (Howarth, 2000). In this 'breaking bonds' or 'severing ties' discourse, detachment from death and the dead was prioritised, resulting in the social and spatial sequestration of death, as well as in pathological descriptions of bereavement (Gorer, 1956, pp. 56–62; Hockey, Komaromy, & Woodthorpe, 2010, p. 10). Grounded in a modernist and positivist paradigm, both the context and the lived experiences of the bereaved were commonly neglected in favour of universal models that aimed at resolving grief (Valentine, 2006). Informed by selective readings of theorists, such as Freud, Bowlby, Parkes, and Kübler-Ross, grief was often treated prescriptively, as a sequence of stages through which each individual *must* pass to recover from a 'maladaptive' situation (Stroebe, 2002). Although the dead were not to be forgotten or dismissed altogether, they were to acquire a place in the past, in memory and were not to play an active role in the future lives of the bereaved (Howarth, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1996; Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Numerous scholars have shown how this resulted in the marginalisation of ongoing relationships between the living and the dead. From the 1990s onwards, however, another academic discourse started to prevail, one aiming to show that relationships 'with the dead could be normal rather than pathological' and did not have to end (Klass, 2006, p. 844; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Grief was humanised and socialised, and Western ways of death were revisited (Valentine, 2006). 'Continuing

bonds' became a dominant paradigm in many disciplines, and bereavement came to be understood as an ongoing process of accommodation, whereby people seek a sense of meaning in the face of losing a significant other (Arnason, 2013).

The diverse and multifaceted relationships between the living and the dead have since been studied in elaborate detail. The process of self-narrative through which people develop and preserve the deceased's personhood, allowing them to find new biographies for themselves and for their dead, has been brought to the fore (Howarth, 2000; Marwit & Klass, 1994–1995; Valentine, 2008; Walter, 1996). Several studies have illustrated the experiences of continuing bonds at home, where the deceased is made present in various ways. Attention has been given to material representations of the deceased's postself, in connection with home memorials, for example, in the Netherlands (Wojtkowiak & Venbrux, 2009, 2010). It has been demonstrated that mundane objects connected with the dead play a role beyond such domestic memorials (Gibson, 2008). The interaction with objects that mediate and signify the presence of the dead shows that, regardless of religious affiliation, people are strongly attached to the material legacies of their deceased (Gibson, 2004). This occurs not only in private settings, but also in public spaces. At the site where they died, in places associated with the deceased, and in cemeteries and their surroundings, the continuing presence of the dead is evoked by and materialised through a variety of memorials: flowers, cards, balloons and letters, in which the dead are often spoken to in the present tense (Francis, Kellaher, & Neophytou, 2005; Maddrell, 2013). Cremated remains have similar power (Heessels, Poots, & Venbrux, 2012; Mathijssen, 2017). In all these cases, it is important to note that the experiencing of an ongoing bond cannot always be controlled, but can be induced by symbols, sounds and traces of shared experiences from the past (Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999).

Whereas many scholars have underlined the importance of studying post-mortem relationships, the dynamics of the relationships themselves has received little attention (for two exceptions, see Miller and Parrot [2009] and Maddrell [2016]). In reaction to the 'breaking bonds' discourse, 'continuity' has become the new normal and, I argue, this has created a blind spot (Klass, 2006; Souza, 2017). By emphasising continuing bonds, we have lost sight of those bonds that are absent (Jonsson, 2015), invisible or which feature a sense of discontinuity. Moreover, the ritual dynamics of post-mortem relationships have been largely overlooked. This paper explores those dynamics, by situating continuing bonds within the process of death ritual.

Death ritual belongs to the genre of rites of passage, and is understood as a protracted process of accumulative rites during which the bereaved and the deceased are taken through various phases of separation, transition and incorporation (Suzuki, 2000; Van Gennep, 1909/1960). The transitional or liminal phase, characterised by insecurity and by being 'betwixt and between' the world of the living and the world of the dead (Turner, 1969), does not abruptly end at the closure of the funeral. Rather, interviews with recently bereaved people in the Netherlands show that separation, transition and incorporation practices emerge in the post-funeral period. Although the process of rites of passage is influenced by how the bereaved perceive the condition of the deceased (Hertz, 1907/1960), and although incorporation rites are often 'the most extensively elaborated and assigned the greatest importance' (Van Gennep, 1909/1960, p. 146), they surprisingly have not been used to examine the dynamics of continuing bonds.

This paper understands the post-funeral period as part of the frontstage of the ritual enactment (Goffman, 1959/1971; Grimes, 2014), wherein the bereaved continue to seek and create a new social and spatial location for themselves and the deceased; in this process, incorporation might occur 'when the representation of the deceased has required a final and pacified character in the consciousness of survivors' (Hertz, 1907/1960, p. 82). The ritual dynamics of separation, transition and integration allow us to further scrutinise post-mortem relationships and, as I will argue, not simply to point to breaking or continuing bonds, but to recognise the 'transforming bonds' whereby both the relationship as well as the social locations of the bereaved and the deceased are gradually altered.

Transforming bonds: things, practices and spaces

Using qualitative illustrations, this paper zooms in on the transforming bonds between the living and the dead by looking at the intersection of things, practices and spaces (Ingold, 2011; Maddrell, 2013). This triad evidences 'dynamic negotiations of absence-presence' (Maddrell, 2013, p. 501), and can shed light on the ritualised separations, transitions and integrations of both the living and the dead occurring in a range of situations, mediated by material objects.

With regard to things, I explore two types of objects that mediate post-mortem relationships. First, I look at 'objects of the dead' (Gibson, 2008). These are objects that belong(ed) to the deceased, were made by the deceased, or symbolise the deceased. Second, I focus on objects that 'incorporate' the ashes of the deceased, and that can be understood as ambiguous person-objects that are in-between living and dead matter (Heessels et al., 2012). Both types of objects can express parts of the identity of the bereaved and the deceased, and may evoke shared memories and sensuous experiences, giving them extraordinary power in negotiating post-mortem bonds. I understand objects thus as having social lives as parts of networks of relationships with people (Ingold, 2011, pp. 22–24; Kopytoff, 1986).

Concerning practice, the paper will illustrate what people do with objects of the dead, as well as with ash objects. I am particularly interested in how the movement of objects through space may involve separation, transition and integration as the bereaved recreate a place for their deceased. Thus, 'place' is understood as meaningful 'space', emerging from the attachments that people have to it (Feld & Basso, 1996; Watts, 2010). The paper focuses on two types of vernacular space (Bowman, 2014, pp. 102, 103), the everyday and non-institutionalised spaces in- and outside of the home. These spaces are rendered invisible to the outsider, as there is no institutionalised collective meaning ascribed to them, as would be the case around cemeteries or roadside memorials. However, these spaces are particularly relevant in the study of post-mortem relationships, since personal belongings of the deceased and ash-objects are often situated within them. Whether it is through memory or current practice, such spaces can become sacred places to the bereaved because of their association with the deceased.

Methods

This paper draws on qualitative interviews with 15 recently bereaved people in the Netherlands, between the ages of 34 and 84, who had recently (up to a year previously) lost an immediate family member, and who were in charge of the funerary practices.[1] The

interviews followed a guide (Heldens & Reysoo, 2005) and lasted between 2 and 3.5 h, during which the interviewees were invited to tell their story of losing a significant other, extending from the moment of death, biologically and socially, all the way to the present. The interviews were held at the homes of the interviewees, as they themselves preferred. What started out as a strategy to create a comfortable, safe interview setting immediately became fundamental for my understanding of the transforming bonds between the bereaved and their deceased. During the interviews, a place was created that illustrated the absence–presence of the deceased, and objects of the dead became part of the interviews (cf. Valentine, 2008). Domestic memorials, items made by the deceased, pictures, ashes, jewellery and artworks were used to convey the deceased's identity, to convey what he or she truly was to the bereaved and to illustrate the story told. The home itself thus came to evidence how relationships with the deceased had been during life, how they were in the present moment and how they had been changing.

Relocating (objects of) the deceased

Refurbishing the home, refurbishing relationships

Refurbishing the home is a task that many bereaved people are confronted with, and which evidences the dynamics of separation, transition and incorporation. This might be particularly true in those instances where the bereaved used to live together with the deceased (Stroebe, 2002). Nellie, one of my interviewees, had taken care of her mother, who, during the final years of her life, had taken up residence in her daughter's home. After her death, her mother remained present through artworks, furniture and clothes. Speaking of various changes that she had made in her home, Nellie's narrative illustrates how she is negotiating the relationship with her mother and gradually reclaiming her own space:

> That, for example, is [my mother's] chair, and I couldn't throw it out. So I reupholstered the chair. […] The colour is almost exactly the same as it used to be. It used to be her chair, and now it has become mine. It makes me feel like she's with me a little. […] Actually, I don't want to get rid of anything she made herself. We both loved doing needlework; I really inherited that from her. […] That [pillow] is one of the last things she made. The last one, [a sampler], is in the hall. I've framed it and I will hang it there [above that cabinet] when I have a new piece of furniture. […] I'm constantly thinking about it but, umm. Yes. Getting rid of that little cabinet also gives me a double feeling. I get rid of her, of her cabinet. That's what I think. There will be something in its place that is really hers, but I still think it is difficult. Like I throw a piece of her away. (Nellie, 62)

Nellie reclaims ownership of her own home by separating her mother from certain objects, relocating her throughout the house, and integrating her in other places. By a gradual sequence of separations, she is weakening the overall presence of her mother, while simultaneously investing in a sense of continuity in particular places, involving particular objects (cf. Miller & Parrot, 2009, p. 516). Her mother's chair, which had always been 'her place' in the house, had just been reupholstered at the time of the interview. The chair had been taken out of the home, the old fabric removed, and it was returned in a new coat. Before, during and after this transition, it continued to be inseparably connected with her mother, wearing almost the same colour as it had before. At the same time, this refurbishment had transformed it into Nellie's. Reintegrating the reupholstered chair into the home not only alters the status of the chair, but also reallocates the home to Nellie.

Another example of transition becomes visible regarding the samplers. The house was filled with them, and Nellie had slowly started to move them around to find places for them. To make room for her mother's final sampler, the cabinet in the living room would have to go. By making arrangements for this, Nellie not only creates a hierarchy in the value of objects of her deceased mother, but she also starts to mark a transition in their relationship. It is not just the cabinet she intends to dispose of, since that item of furniture is also a part of 'her'. Simultaneously, she recreates a place for her own sense of 'self' and for particular aspects of her shared relationship with her mother. The reframed sampler, currently situated in the hallway symbolising the ambiguity of the situation, will be reintegrated in a new place in the living room. From a non-place in the home, it will cross a threshold to acquire a central place as a memorial object. In order for this place to come into being, however, Nellie has to refurbish the home further. An economy of objects emerges, whereby she keeps, dismisses and relocates things that used to belong to her mother. The inalienable value of things, thereby, not lies in the things themselves, but in their relationship with the deceased and in the way they evoke or symbolise shared experiences. This illustrates clearly that a form of presence of the deceased not only points to undifferentiated continuity, but also stands in a dialectic relationship with discontinuity and is negotiated and shaped through dismantling and integrating objects in space.

Negotiating relationships with the dead through photographs

Many bereaved have photographs of the deceased in their homes or within reach – on cupboards, home memorials, hanging on walls, on mobile phones and in albums. For my interviewees, photographs became 'enduring objects of remembrance' and mourning (Gibson, 2004, pp. 290–296). They proved to be ways to connect with the deceased in the home, to talk about, or to, the deceased and to create places for him or her – often together with other deceased friends and family members, establishing a symbolic 'society of the dead' (Hertz, 1907/1960, p. 72). Sometimes the photos were placed among pictures of the living, most notably children and grandchildren, expressing kinship and creating a sense of bio-social immortality (Lifton & Olson, 1974).

Being concerned with the transforming bonds between the living and the dead, I came to find the repositioning of photographs particularly revealing. First, photographs were separated from certain places and incorporated into new ones to signify and reinforce a change in the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased:

> First, the picture of my brother and my father had a prominent place [in the living room], and then I was sitting there at night thinking 'I'm done with the two of you.' […] It was as if [my wife and I] could not move on whilst they were hanging there so prominently. […] So they have now been exiled to the kitchen, which makes them less noticeable. We will keep them in our hearts anyway. (Johan, 59)

After the death of his brother and father, Johan had hung the picture in a central place in his home. Subsequently, he removed it from the wall and placed it in a less visible, less significant spot. The movement of the photo parallels a change in his relationships, in which he aims to give his brother and father a less prominent, but not too distant, place. At first glance, the presence of the photograph of Johan's brother and father, as well as the earlier discussed samplers in the home of Nellie, suggest a form of continuing bonds between the living and the dead. Merely looking at the presence of these objects, however, disguises the

economy of memories and relationships (Miller & Parrot, 2009). It is the practices surrounding these objects, not the objects themselves that mark the separations, transitions, as well as the incorporations of the deceased in the lives of the bereaved. By literally moving objects of the dead through space, a change in the relationship is marked.

Second, the form of the photographs in relation to the deceased's 'multiple post-death identities' (Unruh, 1983, p. 341) was decisive. During the process of loss, people are likely to slowly dismiss the objects of their dead until they retain only a few precious ones (Miller & Parrot, 2009). In choosing particular pictures (as well as other objects) to display in the home after a recent loss, the bereaved start to negotiate the authenticity and idealisation of the post-death identity of their deceased (Goffman, 1959). Charles, another interviewee, had put on display a picture of his wife Emma with their grandchild, expressing and fulfilling a part of her social identify that could have developed if she had not suffered from Alzheimer's disease. Although attractive pictures like these were the only ones on display in his home, other pictures of Emma played a profound role in his life:

> [I placed most photos on that cabinet] after the funeral […]. Beautiful. I can sit here and look at her. Or I use my phone […] I have them all on my phone. The other day, when I was visiting [friends], we watched photos and talked about memories. Also with people who didn't know her. Also a friend of mine in France, I showed him [pictures] and then you can talk about it. (Charles, 57)

It is revealing to distinguish between the photos that have physical places in the home and photos that have a mobile place on smartphones, the latter being situational in character, as such photos are not continuously present but have to be looked up and scrolled through. Smartphones allow people to not only to keep an idealised image of the deceased at hand, which many of the displayed portraits do most solemnly, but also to retain images of authentic but less ideal moments and (shared) identities. In the case of Charles, they included images of his wife's illness, hospitalisations, as well as post-mortem portraits. Because these images can be brought to the fore temporarily – to look at, show to others, and then put away again – mobile phones allow the bereaved to cherish, dismantle and negotiate the diverse identities of the deceased, thereby enabling them to make their post-mortem relationship more private as well as more public.

Wearing the dead

Because of their metonymical relation to the deceased (Turner, 1973), clothes and jewellery play an extraordinary role in creating both distance and proximity between oneself and one's deceased. Through clothes and jewellery, the bereaved may separate themselves from their deceased by integrating him or her into a new setting, giving clothes away to charity or placing them in a closet. At the same time, clothes enable the bereaved to separate the deceased from a passive setting, such as a closet or coat stand, to recreate physical as well as mental proximity:

> At one point I decided it was time to clean the closet. I could not give his clothes to anyone else. I just couldn't do that. I don't want anyone else to wear him. I would wear his coat. In the beginning I did this a lot. I would wear this and that […]. I did want to throw it away, but when I opened the closet, I could smell him […]. After he died I started to wear his jumper and a pair of trousers and the neighbours said: 'When will you take them off?' I only took them off three or four weeks ago. Suddenly it was time. I felt that it had been enough. (Yvonne, 53)

This example of Yvonne is an illustration of physical, dynamic bonds with the deceased. The sense of presence is not vague, but specific and sensuous, conveyed through sight, touch and smell. The seeing and smelling of the clothes evokes the presence of her brother, Tim, and wearing the clothes reinforces it. Yvonne's relationship with the clothes parallels an ambiguous relationship with Tim. On the one hand, his presence brings comfort. On the other, it is uncomfortable: she wishes to alter the relationship, but is unable to do so. She is caught 'betwixt and between' her brother's absence–presence (Turner, 1969), perhaps even haunted by it, until she is 'suddenly' able to distance herself from him. Taking his clothes off, then, marks this. Yvonne's brother has by no means left her life altogether, as we will see later in relation to his cremated remains, but their relationship has been rebalanced.

Clothing not only induces the sensory presence of the dead, but is also a means to deliberately bring the dead 'back to life'. Heleen had recently lost her husband; four years earlier she had lost her sister; and a year after that her mother had also passed away. She negotiated her bonds with them in various ways. In her home, for example, she had made a domestic memorial that had become a place for the shared memories with her husband, and which also came to include her sister and mother. The memorial provided a constant, solid place in the home that she, like Nellie, was currently refurbishing. Moreover, she had just given her husband's clothes to charity, but she had kept a few of his favourite jumpers and had collected together the jewellery that her husband, sister and mother had given to her – transforming them into memorial objects with extraordinary value. By wearing particular pieces of jewellery at specific moments, Heleen temporarily brought the deceased into near proximity with her as well as with each other:

> If you now think about how I've dressed this morning. This is my engagement bracelet. I thought, [my husband] will then be with us, with our conversation. And this, this is the golden brooch [of my sister]. […] When she was very ill and already in the hospital […] she wore it every day and she was so proud of it. [After she died we lost it, but I found it again when I was sorting her clothes]. Well, and umm, this morning I thought […] she had to be with us as well. And this is the ring I got from my mother. So I live a little … but almost nobody knows. When I go somewhere I take these things along and they are with me. When you think about it rationally, it doesn't make sense of course, but to me it gives comfort and strength. So, I like those kinds of things. (Heleen, 67)

People's encounters with clothes not only evidence (a desire for) temporal or definitive attachment and/or detachment, but also pose challenges to the bereaved. The awareness of a changing relationship can be a confrontational and grievous experience, affected by personal emotions and social expectations:

> You also have to deal with stuff. Umm … there is a jacket on the coat stand that I cannot throw out yet. I think it is … yes, it implies a detachment from what we had. That is how it feels. Imagine me taking it and throwing it out. It is strange. It is becoming more difficult as well. […] In a certain way, it feels like a reckoning, like tearing us apart. (Charles, 59)

This second fragment of Charles's narrative demonstrates the difficulty of negotiating post-death relationships. His relationship with the jacket in the hall signifies a strong awareness of his bond with his wife. It represents what they had, and by throwing it out, it is as if he is tearing them apart. The notion that he 'cannot throw [it] out *yet*' signals Charles's sense that a form of detachment ought to happen by disposing of her things. His facing difficulty in that regard not only exemplifies the agency of her clothes, but also relates to the social expectations in his environment. Due to his wife's illness, Charles explained, his mourning process had started before her biological death (Mulkay & Ernst, 1991; Sweeting & Gilhooly,

1997). Now, he 'want[s] to look forward. […] to do fun things again. […] My children think I'm moving too fast'. Creating distance from the 'stuff' that once belonged to his wife is thus a complex matter. The belongings of the deceased can be concealed or displayed to evidence, reinforce or contest a changing relationship.

Ritualising relationships with cremated remains

We have now seen that the dead are separated from and reintegrated into the lives of the living through practices with things which can extend, transform and discontinue relationships. In some of the examples discussed above, the boundary between persons and thing was obscured, as the object could be regarded as an extension of the deceased's identity, and, in some cases, of his or her body as well. Boundaries between persons and things become particularly vague if we look at corporeal objects. The cremated remains are the deceased in a symbolic as well as a very physical sense, giving them extraordinary power and agency in negotiating the transforming relationships between the living and the dead.

Relocating animated dead matter in the home

Marja told me about the cremated remains of her mother as she took a little box out of the cupboard that held some of them. After the cremation, the family had decided to divide up her ashes so everyone 'would have a piece of her'. The rest of their mother's cremated remains, which the family had not anticipated would exist, were scattered near the chapel of the church which she had loved to visit, and which Marja regularly passed when walking her dog. In this way, part of her mother was kept within walking distance. I was invited to open the little box that was taken out of the cupboard and, alongside her remains were other objects. She pointed to the wedding ring of her mother and to a charm for a Pandora bracelet, which incorporates some of her mother's ashes. Also present was a little bracelet of her granddaughter's, who was born a few weeks after the funeral. Marja's relationship with the ash charm illustrates the dynamics of the transforming bond with her deceased mother:

> In the beginning, I started to wear the charm on my bracelet and I never took it off. Then, I made a necklace out of it, so I could wear her [close to my heart]. I thought this was very beautiful: she was always with me. Then, at one point, I thought, when did she pass away? Eight months ago … so I had worn it for seven months. And [during those months I had] always said [to my children], no, our mum will join us everywhere we go. But at one point … it just didn't feel comfortable anymore. […] I had to take her off […] I don't know, I was standing in front of the mirror and I was thinking, what are you doing? Always wearing your mother? I took her off and never wore her again. (Marja, 50)

Wearing her mother's ashes, Marja first expresses a strong sense and appreciation of continuity and a desire for proximity, illustrated by the movement of the little ash charm from her bracelet to the necklace close to her heart. By changing the form, she relocates her mother to a more intimate place. Marja wore the ash charm for months, and had not considered the possibility that this would change. Then, unexpectedly, she felt uncomfortable. By taking 'mum' off she marks a separation, spatially distancing herself from her mother, evidencing a change in their relationship:

> I felt like mum was with me, but I don't have that anymore now. She still exists. Surely. But she is no longer in my mind 24/7 […] Look, she is standing there. [She points to a photo in the cupboard, next to the little box with ashes]. Every week, I put flowers there, and I tell her, 'Well

mum, you have new flowers.' I don't forget her, but it is okay now. […] I miss her, but I'm at peace with it as well. […] In the future perhaps I will have moments when I want to wear her again, and then I can wear the necklace again. When I really want to be close with her, I have the necklace. That is really something of my mum. Literally, I can wear her ashes. But for now she is standing there, so I have time for myself. (Marja, 50)

Here, it becomes clear that the relocation of the ashes from the necklace to the little box in the cupboard, resembling the pattern of a rite of passage, evidences a form of loosening ties. Mum moved from 'here', close to her heart, to 'there', in the cupboard. By moving the ashes, her mother is integrated in a new place 'for now'. In several steps, Marja ritualises a transition that loosens the ties with her deceased mother, and through which she finds a new place in the home for her mum to reside. The presence of her mother in the cupboard, as well as her talking to her mother and the ritual gesture of placing flowers (Grimes, 2014, p. 285), could be considered a form of separation and integration, rather than of continuation. As we have seen with objects of the dead, the materialisations of transition are fundamental in understanding how Marja lives with and negotiates the absence–presence of her mother. Lastly, the temporality of this situation is expressed, as Marja is well aware of the possibility she could 'put her mum back on' if she wants to be close to her. Bonds not simply continue, as if often emphasised, but change as they continue.

Post-mortem journeys

The tension between distance and proximity, between letting go and keeping close, is not only apparent in the homes of the bereaved. Bonds with the dead at home stand in relation to places for the dead outside of the home. Yvonne, who we have already encountered, had lost her brother Tim to cancer, seven months prior to our interview. During my visit, Yvonne gave a detailed account of the continuing relationship she was experiencing with her brother. She described the strong presence of her brother in her own home after the funeral, which made her feel both comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time. She could 'see him standing in the kitchen, smiling at her, baking pancakes', they had conversations, he made noises in the house and she wore his clothes – as we have seen earlier.

Yvonne's story about Tim's presence reveals another characteristic of post-mortem relationships, one that we encountered in several interviews. The bereaved were *refraining from* practicing particular things in view of their relationship with the deceased. Yvonne had not baked pancakes since her brother had died, and Nellie had not eaten asparagus since her mother's death, as this was her mother's favourite dish. Thus, the act of not practicing something can be a way of keeping the dead in proximity. Eating these particular dishes felt to Yvonne and Nellie as if they were confiscating part of the deceased's identity. The practice would no longer typically belong to the deceased.

Tim's presence thus posed difficulties to Yvonne, and when she was allowed to retrieve the ashes from the crematorium, she felt herself unable to bring them home: 'No, the idea of placing him here, and I would start staring at it […]. No, I didn't want to'. Instead, Yvonne chose to negotiate the challenge imposed by Tim's cremated remains by bringing him out of the home:

I thought: he has to go to […] Lake Garda. […] [In the plane] Tim had his own seat, and I took pictures of him at the airport. He had told me to fly to Bergamo, as it is inexpensive. Even after his death, he's urging us to be careful with money. Very amusing. […] When we arrived at Lake Garda […] we [drove around for a few days to find a place] and we scattered the ashes there

at night, on his birthday. […] Afterwards, [my friends] found out that some ashes had stayed in the urn, and they knew how I felt about this. They had once asked me whether I wanted a piece of jewellery with his ashes, and I told them: 'My brother was whole, complete. Then he was broken by his illness, but they made him complete again. He has to go as a whole.' […] So [my friends] drove back to the same place and made sure his remains were scattered completely. […] If you look at the lake [she shows pictures], you can see what a wonderful view he has. He is celebrating his holiday in Italy. Lovely isn't it? I know that he is intensely happy over there; this is what he wanted, so it's good. (Yvonne, 53)

Going on a holiday, where the journey is as important as the destination, is a fitting metaphor for the ways in which alterations in a relationship are ritually marked. Both Tim and Yvonne's movements resemble a dynamic tripartite pattern. Tim, who had symbolically 'died' for Yvonne as the 'brother she knew' when his cancer treatment started, is, through death, going to a new home that will restore wholeness. Yvonne gives her brother a new place in which to reside. She ritualises a 'retrospective fulfilment' of his identity by making his lifelong dream come true – that is, celebrating his old days in Italy (Davies, 2002, p. 141). By doing so she simultaneously creates a sense of distance through relocation. By creating presence in a different place, she negotiates the absence–presence in her own everyday life, in her own home.

In the beginning of Yvonne's narrative about the period after the cremation ceremony, we can almost speak of a lack of absence. She found herself in a situation in which Tim was too present, as if he were alive. This experience, combined with her fear that his presence would escalate, made her decide not to keep the ashes at home. The cremated remains evoked a too-strong sense of presence. For Yvonne, as in the example of Marja, the distinction between thing and person has become vague. The seat in the plane, which Tim occupied like any other passenger, evidences this profoundly. So do the pictures she took of *him*, as well as *his* influence over which tickets to buy. Both Yvonne and Tim are actively participating in the journey ahead. However, by taking his ashes from the crematorium and by leaving Dutch soil, things begin to change. The transitional phase is evidenced by her narrative, in which she starts to speak of 'his ashes' rather than 'him' when referring directly to the cremated remains.

When Yvonne arrived at Lake Garda with her friends they had to find a 'good spot' to scatter the remains; and after driving around the lake for a few days, they returned to the pier they had first encountered. It had to be a 'place with a view' for Tim to spend his this-worldly afterlife. Lake Garda is an everyday place with no particularly significant, institutionalised meaning. The deceased himself is, thus, not only ritually relocated, but by doing so the lake is transformed into a significant, sacred place for the bereaved and a new home for the deceased, whilst merely remaining a holiday destination for many others.

Following the separation from Dutch soil and the transition to Italy, reintegration takes place. Most strikingly, this becomes vivid in Yvonne's emphasis on wholeness. Earlier in our interview, she had described her brother as someone who cared about his physical appearance and health, as well as a person who loved to swim. His illness and the operations had destroyed that part of him. Scattering his ashes all together at the same place, in the water, restored part of his 'original' identity. By doing so, Yvonne is able to heal her brother, as well as her own experiences in relation to his illness. She no longer talks about *his ashes*, but about *him* 'celebrating his holiday'. In travelling back to the Netherlands by herself, leaving her brother in Italy, Yvonne had to let go while at the same time, she had created a place of

continuity. For both of them, a rather stable 'well-defined position' emerged, resulting in a temporal balance of absence–presence.

The notion of temporality, regarding the balance of absence–presence, might seem to stand at odds with the 'final' act of scattering the cremated remains overseas. The distance that Yvonne created, knowing 'that he is intensely happy over there', gave her a sense of peace and comfort. At the same time, however, the use of the present tense to refer to her brother evidences that this new 'well-defined position' is in fact dynamic and subject to negotiation. The ways in which she talked about her brother during the interview show that, although she has distanced herself from her brother by giving him his eternal Italian holiday, his presence continued to be evident in other places, not least as imprinted in objects in the home.

The cases of Marja and Yvonne both draw attention to the way in which the continuing bonds paradigm disguises the changing relationships that characterise bereavement. They show that the continued presence of the dead, particularly when it comes very evidently and clearly to the fore, may not simply indicate a continuity of presence, but rather a relocation of that presence, one that allows people to live their lives with and without their dead. By materially separating specific parts of the deceased from particular places and by integrating them elsewhere, either close at hand or miles away, the bereaved renegotiate the experienced absence–presence, thereby creating meaningful places for themselves and their deceased.

Collective dimensions of transforming bonds

So far, this paper has adopted a largely individualistic perspective on transforming bonds. Although the performance of relationships between the living and the dead can be understood in terms of personalised incorporation practices, these practices are of course profoundly social (Grimes, 2000). The social environment of the bereaved plays a fundamental role in the dynamics of post-mortem relationships. Post-cremation and post-burial rituals, disposing of the ashes, erecting a grave stone, refurbishments in the home, often include a group of dearest and nearest relatives and may evoke a sense of communitas (Francis et al., 2005; Heessels et al., 2012; Turner, 1969). Moreover, the absence–presence of the deceased can be situationally evoked by the gathering of a certain collective (Grimes, 2000; Hallam & Hockey, 2001; Hallam et al., 1999; Howarth, 2000; Valentine, 2008). Many narratives of my interviewees underlined that the gap left by those no longer present was shared and negotiated with others, and was particularly felt when celebrating an event with friends and family. However, the notion of collectivity plays a further role as well: the changes that people make in the relationship with their deceased are influenced by the norms and values of the social context, and are made visible with respect to that social environment. This particularly concerns the displaying or concealing of memorial objects.

Making changes visible to others

In terms of changes in post-mortem relationships, the qualitative data show that the bereaved make such changes visible to others in implicit and explicit ways. When Johan, who felt that his deceased brother and father were too present, moved their picture from the living room to the kitchen, it might also have expressed a change to those visiting the

home. One can imagine that those who visit Johan remark upon the picture or will hear the story of how his brother and father had 'been exiled to the kitchen'. Yvonne mentioned that her neighbours had commented on her wearing her brother's jumper. Thus, when Yvonne stopped wearing her brother's jumper, her neighbours received a sign that something had changed. A more explicit example comes from Marja. Taking off the necklace containing her mother's ashes marked a profound change for her. A very private act and experience, carried out when looking at herself in the mirror, it became a statement to her environment that something had changed:

> Three weeks ago I took [my mother] off. I asked [my husband, son, and daughter-in-law]: 'Can you see anything different about me?' 'What are we supposed to see?' Yes, they of course didn't see it anymore either. I wore the necklace, but … I said: 'I took my mum off. It is done.'

The norms and values of the social context

My material further illustrates that other friends, family members and colleagues influence the relationship one has with the deceased. The norms and values of other people are particularly influential on the changes that the bereaved person makes, or does not make, in that relationship. People sometimes do not use objects to mark a transition in view of the social context, although they experience a change in their relationship with the deceased.

Photographs, for example, were sometimes cherished for the benefit of visitors, rather than because of the bereaved person's own bond with the deceased. Elizabeth, a woman who had lost her husband, told us she would like to change the picture of her husband in the living room, and find a smaller one to replace it. She explained 'she was not fond of the particular picture' and already had 'a beautiful one in her bedroom'. She felt it was no longer necessary for the picture to be given a place in the living room. However, her children had given her the picture, suggesting to her that they found it important. In view of their feelings, she was reluctant to change it.

Another example of the impact of family relationships could be found in the interviews with Charles and his daughter Lisa. When Charles described the difficulty of letting go of his wife, it was not only their relationship that played a role in the process, but also the bonds within his family. He told us about a few dates that he had had with a widowed woman, but, as mentioned above, his three children felt that their father was moving too fast in this regard. Although for Charles, the time felt right, his children felt he was not only detaching from their mother, but more particularly from them and from 'who [they] were as a family'. Charles explained that his dates helped him to deal with his loss, as he could talk about grieving for his wife, emotions that the other woman was experiencing too. However, since his children remarked on it, he felt that he had to relate his own bereavement to that of his children, and felt he had to seek ways to deal with it as a family. Not only does his relationship with his wife have to be reshaped, but so do the changing relationships within his family and the meaning of 'family' itself.

Another important element of the influence of norms and values of other people comes to the fore in the question of 'normal' mourning. As in earlier research (Valentine, 2008), I observed the dominance of the breaking bonds framework in expressions of the interviewees in this project. This was most notable in sayings like 'You must think I'm weird', 'If you think about it rationally, it is not true of course' or 'I know it is not real', when referring to ongoing relationships with the dead. Furthermore, other people's opinions about the fact that a

change ought to be made were deeply felt. During my participant observations at a crematorium in Amsterdam, for instance, a woman called the office to ask how she should deal with the loss of her husband, who had passed away two months earlier. As a friend had told her it was time to move on, she felt an obligation, which she was as yet unable to fulfil. The comments that Yvonne received from her neighbours are another example. Regardless of whether Yvonne wanted to take Tim's jumper off that was clearly what she felt her social environment expected of her. This made her feel like she had to let go of her brother. Personalised incorporation practices are thus inevitably linked to negotiations and contestations in the social sphere, and the norms and values of the social environment.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, continuing bonds has become a dominant way of understanding bereavement. However, by emphasising continuity, this framework has drawn attention away from the changing relationships that characterise bereavement. This paper has illustrated the value of a ritual perspective to scrutinise the ways in which the bereaved (re)negotiate their relationship with the deceased. By looking at the ritual dynamics of separation, transition and incorporation in the intersection of things, practices and spaces, it has explored the transforming bonds between the living and the dead in the Netherlands. Through material practices – which were understood to be embedded in the process of death ritual – the bereaved shape and reinforce change in their relationship with the dead, thereby altering and creating a hierarchy in the value of objects. By moving particular objects in and through spaces, and crossing thresholds, parts of the identity of the deceased are gradually separated, transformed and incorporated in faraway spaces and in the everyday environment of the bereaved, thus creating meaningful places. Through these practices – which are inevitably linked to negotiations and contestations in the social sphere – bonds become tightened and loosened, and parts of the multiple identities of the deceased can be idealised and fulfilled retrospectively. While part of the deceased's identity can be made ritually absent, for example, by moving the ashes overseas, other objects imprinted with a sense of the deceased's identity will continue to maintain a place in the lives of the bereaved. In general, or at specific times, they may reopen the relationship with the deceased and they continue to be a means to renegotiate that relationship. Therefore, the separations, transitions and integrations of the deceased in the lives of the bereaved cannot be understood as a linear process with one desirable outcome, but represent an ongoing process of negotiation.

Note

1. This paper is part of a doctoral research project on Dutch death rites, conducted between 2013 an 2017 at Radboud University, for which the author also conducted participant observation in two funeral homes and a crematorium for a total period of six months.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Brenda Mathijssen is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Reading, UK, with research interests in death, lived religion and migration. Also, she is affiliated to the Centre for Thanatology at the Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

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