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Abstract

This article questions the emphasis on presence within material culture studies, using the example of a new burial landscape where the UK's now conventional mortuary culture is often missing. The authors ask how the absences initiated by a death are articulated or materialized when body disposal and memorialization occur outwith a delineated boundary and identifiable buildings, a grave marked with head and kerb stones, and an embalmed body in a hardwood casket. Exploring data generated through an ESRC-funded project, the article examines tensions between the Natural Burial Movement's goals and the practices of particular natural burial ground owners, managers and bereaved users. These practices, the authors argue, reflect the layers of competing orientations towards the landscape and nature that those involved in natural burial are heir to. In this way, the article draws out the ambiguities and contradictions implicit within the social practices that constitute natural burial and the landscapes within which it occurs.

Keywords

absence and presence, death, landscape, natural burial, nature

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Mementoes, memorials, words and artefacts can be understood as external cultural forms functioning to sustain thoughts and images that are conceived of as part of the internal states of living persons. The relations between internal and external domains are subject to change over time as well as to cross-cultural variation. (Hallam and Hockey, 2001: 4)

In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (Stoppard, 1968), the character Guildenstern famously explains that ‘death is not anything ... death is ... not. It’s the absence of presence, nothing more’ (Act 2, line 343 ff). In relation to this ‘absence’, however, human beings in different parts of the world, and throughout history, have created memorials, portraits, tombs, jewellery and burial grounds, among many other forms of material culture. As Bronfen (1992: 77) argues: ‘death emphasizes the impermanence of social experience and elicits attempts to preserve some aspect of it in permanent form.’ In Bloch’s (1971) ethnographic account of the Merina people of Madagascar, for example, he describes their tombs as ‘the most solid and best built structures which the Merina undertake, and the land on which they stand is inalienable’ (p. 112).

This article addresses the absences brought about by death – the losses of embodied presence, participation in everyday life and relationships, emotional equilibrium among bereaved people and, ultimately, the memory of someone who once lived. In their anthropology of absence, Bille et al. (2010: 4) question the privileging of presence within material culture studies, arguing for a view of absences as ‘cultural, physical and social phenomena that powerfully influence people’s conceptualizations of themselves and the world they engage with’. They advocate a focus on ‘the mutual interdependence in people’s lives of the materially present and the materially absent’, one which recognizes the ‘local, complex and not necessarily consistent’ processes through which the properties of absence and presence gain significance.

This article takes up this task, drawing on data from a 3-year ESRC-funded project that explores the cultural, social and emotional implications of natural burial. The study comprises ethnographic work at four natural burial sites, visits and interviews with managers or owners at another 16, and the compilation of a database of the UK’s natural burial grounds. Our choice of sites reflected a concern with the diversity of interpretations of natural burial across different landscapes and forms of ownership and/or management. For ethnographic work we therefore selected a site owned and managed by a charitable trust with a broader interest in sustainable environments, a local authority site within a municipal cemetery, a site established and managed by a farming couple and a site set up and managed by a funeral director. This breadth of data revealed the investments of different constituencies within shared burial environments and comprises observations and accounts from among bereaved people, natural burial ground visitors, managers and owners, and death care professionals and communities local to particular sites.

The material culture of burial

In the UK, there is evidence of a material culture of burial from around 4000 BC (Ray, 1999), even though the sites and artefacts that remain accessible exclude many

deaths; churchyards, for example, often contain more bodies than names on grave-stones indicate (Horrox, 1999). Natural burial grounds, however, are unlikely to incorporate the permanent markers of human culture which, in the UK, have lent burial grounds a 'sacred' status and provided containment for the human body: for example, durable coffins, grave stones, a boundary wall and dedicated buildings (Rugg, 2000).

The Natural Burial Movement was established in 1991 to provide burial grounds that privilege environmental considerations. These are sites where, for example, traditional headstones are not permitted, where embalming and hardwood caskets are eschewed and where preserving or creating new habitats is a priority. The first natural burial ground was set up in 1993 within Carlisle municipal cemetery. Since then, over 212¹ sites have been established in the UK, not only by local councils, but also by new providers: charities and not-for-profit groups, natural burial companies, funeral directors, landowners and farmers. While the Carlisle site was described as a woodland burial ground, the concept now encompasses habitats ranging from wildflower meadows and mature woodland through to pasture and orchard. Yet within this diversity of 'natural' environments, there are few of the traditional forms of material culture through which deaths have been made visible and the identity of the deceased sustained or re-worked.

It is within landscapes such as these that we explore the 'local, complex and not necessarily consistent' processes through which the interdependency of absence and presence is played out (Bille et al., 2010: 4). We argue that the absence of a conventional material culture of death and the loss of a person who has died articulate with the emergence of new burial landscapes that encompass the presence of corpses, bereaved people and site owners/managers. Moreover, for many of the bereaved people interviewed, being present in the natural burial ground evoked both the absence *and* the presence of the dead person. While Bille et al. highlight the capacity of absences to 'powerfully influence people's conceptualizations of themselves and the world they engage with', as our data show, the agency of both site owners/managers and bereaved people also contributes to a 'continuous and ambiguous spectrum' of understandings of absence and presence (p. 10). To investigate how all this happens in the natural burial environment, however, we need to consider the legacy of landscape's complex history and the fluctuating properties of something understood as 'nature' or 'the natural'.

Landscape/taskscape

Theorists of landscape such as Berger (1980), Jackson (1980), Cosgrove (1985), Urry (1990), Olwig (1993a, 1993b, 2008), Bender (1993) and Macnaghten and Urry (1998) have identified the emergence of a dominant Western notion of 'landscape' during the 17th and 18th centuries. As Bender (1993: 1) argues, this is a surface-oriented and ego-centred 'view' of landscape: 'a perspectival landscape, a landscape of views and vistas'. It reflects Enlightenment thought, where 'nature' was constituted as separate from, and the object of, human activity. Yet post-Enlightenment processes of industrialization and urbanization contributed to an

alternative, Romantic view where ‘nature sustained “her” separation by departing from the predominant human sphere to the margins of modern society’ (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998: 13). From both these perspectives, then, human beings understood themselves to live apart from their ‘natural’ environment, albeit in different ways. The related notion of ‘landscape’ similarly reflects this distance. Olwig (1993a: 318) explains how the word ‘landscape’ or *landschap*, which 17th-century Dutch artists used to describe paintings of the countryside, came to refer to ‘a picture representing a view of natural inland scenery’ when it was taken up by English connoisseurs who imported these paintings. Over time, this use of the word ‘landscape’ shifted to refer to the painting’s *subject*: a ‘portion of land that the eye can comprehend in a single view’ (p. 320). Olwig (2008: 81) notes that both these meanings of landscape persisted, the former representing ‘a monocular perspective that is fixed and distant from the body’ and the latter a ‘binocular vision, movement and knowledge gained from a coordinated use of the senses in carrying out various tasks’. In the earlier case, painters create pictures using central point perspective, a gridded, orthogonal framework representing an abstract space with objects within it. This ‘scenic’ landscape, as Olwig says, grew out of cartography, the landscape of the map. This, in turn, he links with property boundaries, the landowner who ‘commands a view of the land from the perspective of the map, the landscape painting or the world viewed as if in a landscape painting or on a stage’ (p. 83). Ownership, a sense of the land belonging to oneself, contrasts with a sense of *belonging to* the landscape through moving and acting within it, using both eyes, a sense of landscape that Ingold (2000) describes as a ‘dwelling’ perspective. That these divergent views co-exist is, indeed, clear from Bender’s (1993: 2) reference to ‘an alternative, peasant’s, “close-up” landscape of open field and drove-way’, as epitomized in the work of early 19th-century peasant poet John Clare who wrote from the vernacular perspective of the peasant, despite resistance from his publisher and patron. The point of view expressed in his *Clock-O’-Clay* is thus located *within* the landscape:

In the cowslip pips I lie,
Hidden from the buzzing fly,
While green grass beneath me lies,
Pearled with dew like fishes’ eyes.
(Untermeyer, 1960: 368)

During the 19th century, Millet’s paintings of peasants also represented a kind of ‘dwelling’ perspective (Ingold, 2000). However, as Berger (1980) argues, the monocular vision of the landscape painting conventions that Millet inherited render this goal elusive. Millet’s peasants, in his view, work *in front of* rather than on the land. This, Berger says

is epitomized by the horizon. The traveller/spectator looks towards the horizon: for the working peasant bent over the land, the horizon is either invisible or is the totally surrounding edge of the sky from which the weather comes. (pp. 88–89)

These arguments concern a north European engagement with the landscape that reflects socio-political processes of acquiring, representing and working the land. However, as Olwig (2008: 85) notes:

today property ownership has become endemic, and mass communications and mass tourism have taught the world to appreciate landscape scenery as a good that becomes yours when you purchase a charter tour, a guidebook and a one-eyed camera.

This more global perspective is evidenced in Andalusia where tourism replaced mining and farming as the country's primary economic activity. Explaining how 'post-agrarian and post-industrial spaces, which were once working spaces, have become landscapes for contemplation', Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009: 149) explore diverse conceptions of nature and how these influence indigenous and tourist perceptions of the Andalusian landscape. They describe processes of 'heritagization' which, for example, have involved the 'naturalization' of former farmlands, creating a National Park that offers tourists an 'unspoilt' landscape. This 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990) is contrasted with the responses of miners and farmers themselves. Miners understand 'nature' as something beautiful when revealed through open-cast mining, the strangeness of its colours, forms and smells; farmers consider 'nature' beautiful when human intervention has ensured that vegetation is cut back and cultivated, that water and other nutrients are furnished. Thus, mining uncovers nature and farming creates it. It is, as Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009) describe, a humanized or cultured nature that enfolds experience, memory and affect. The notion of landscape as scenery to be viewed, the contemplative touristic gaze, however, rests upon a notion of 'nature' as something apart from human beings, even if that 'nature' is something they own. When explaining the position of miners who see their former work environments as sites of natural beauty, Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009: 157) note that for them, as for others, 'estrangement is a defining element in the construction of the natural'. Olwig (1993b), like Bender (1993), views this estrangement as historically specific. Until the 17th century, 'nature' was absolutely not scenery to be viewed. It was the invisible 'generative, birthing process behind the seen, producing that which is seen' (Olwig, 1993b: 91). Tellingly for some of the difficulties we noted in natural burial grounds, Olwig suggests that 'there may yet be tensions and contradictions in our modern use of the concept of nature that stem from the Renaissance, and which have yet to be resolved.'

That these understandings of nature have political and economic implications is evidenced in both the work on 'heritagization' by Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009) and Olwig's (1993b) account of the decision-making by the Danish Nature Preservation Society about the ownership and management of natural sites. Here, the aesthetic or visual dimensions of a site regularly trump scientific evidence of its geological, botanical, ornithological or cultural historical importance. Thus, a sensory hierarchy that privileges vision informs policy about the protection of particular areas of land. At issue, then, are the values, or the value, attached to such environments. Olwig continues: 'it is no coincidence that many of the nature areas which environmentalists seek to preserve are the same landscapes which are coveted for golf courses, resort hotels, corporate headquarters and the like' (p. 99). In this formulation, ownership, rather than belonging, characterizes the relationship between people and the landscape.

These arguments turn on specific historical occurrences: the emergence of a style of painting, and the rise of the stately home and the value added through vistas of landscapes worked by people of another social class. These occurrences have, however, shaped more than the discourses of governments promoting tourism – they also inform current academic thought.

In his critique of a conventional social science position, that people view the world through culturally-specific lenses, Ingold (2000) argues that this notion misleadingly assumes a separation between human beings and their surroundings. This separation, however, as Olwig (1993a, 1993b) and Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009) show, has a material *grounding* in the possibility of distancing oneself from the landscape by having other people create it for you – through mining, cultivation, painting or the preservation of ‘unspoilt’ landscapes in national parks. It is a landscape one owns, in some form, rather than belongs to. Along with a mistaken social science, then, we are dealing with the material outcomes of socio-political relationships. As Darby (2000: 9), for example, argues ‘the representation of landscape is not innocent of a politics. It is deeply embedded in relations of power and knowledge.’ When Ingold (2000) posits a ‘dwelling’ perspective, the notion that human beings are dynamic constituents of a world in flux who ‘know’ the world through their embodied co-presence within it, his argument might seem apolitical. Certainly, it evokes Olwig’s (2008) discussion of how human beings bond with landscapes through bodily engagement (for example, herding sheep or repeatedly treading a path). Through these practices, Olwig argues, a ‘substantive’ landscape emerges, one which is ‘a creature of the inhabitants’ daily tasks ... and daily habits’ (p. 87). By contrast, conventional social science perspectives, which treat culture as a lens through which environments are understood, might be thought of as an appropriate model for explaining perspectival or panoramic experiences of landscape.

Miller (2009), for example, argued that Ingold’s concern with the materials that constitute the world, including its human members, reflects a ‘primitivist’ desire for direct engagement with ‘virgin materials’. In response, Ingold (2009: 33) says that ‘even when materials are consolidated into the form of artefacts [mobile phones, cars, toys], they are still here, and continue to be caught up, along with their users, in the fluxes of the medium.’ In his view, we cannot but engage with a world in motion, a fluidity and volatility of materials which, over time, constitute a *taskscape*, an environment of action and movement that encompasses the flow of rivers and glaciers, the bending of branches, the shifting of tectonic plates. Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009: 162), however, are concerned with differences *between* landscapes that derive from historically-located occurrences and have persistent socio-political implications. For them, when land formerly farmed or mined is ‘naturalized’ for economic reasons then ‘the environment changes from a “taskscape” to a landscape’, to be viewed from a distance by tourists, along with ‘delocalized’ and ‘deactivated’ miners and farmers.

Landscape or taskscape? Implications for the natural burial environment

Digging holes in a field in which to bury corpses is not the same as driving sheep onto grazing land. Yet in some natural burial grounds, these activities occur in parallel.

Even when land is reserved primarily for burial, its mortuary purpose may not differentiate it from its surroundings. These characteristics of natural burial grounds return us to the question of how both site owners/managers and bereaved people engage with the presence of the corpses of people whose death has initiated the kinds of absence listed above. How do these absences become present in sites designed to bear limited evidence of human intervention? Certainly, our data show that even subtle markers can alter the way a field or woodland is engaged with. For example, we took focus group participants with no previous experience of natural burial into a field with trees planted among high grasses, where the kerb sets that conventionally indicate grave boundaries were missing and, apart from one mown pathway, no routes led among the grasses. Entering the field, however, participants passed a sign bearing the site's name and purpose. Once inside they trod carefully, fearful of walking above a corpse (Clayden et al., 2010). Similarly, at a burial ground without signage, a bereaved visitor we interviewed said that when she told dog walkers hesitating at the gate that it was a burial ground they left hurriedly.

The absences introduced by death can thus become present, even without a material culture of gravestones, cemetery chapels and railings (Rugg, 2000). As Bille et al. (2010: 10) argue: 'the absence of one thing attracts attention to or even provokes the production of another', in this case, behaviours associated with respect, circumspection or indeed avoidance. So these data show various perduring *presences*: the mortuary purpose of a field or woodland, the demise of particular individuals, the memory of relationships now severed in an embodied sense. Yet as Bille et al. also insist, the properties of absence and presence not only depend upon one another for significance but are also reliant upon processes which are 'local, complex and not necessarily consistent' (p. 4). To properly understand these processes, however, we must also consider the co-existence of different orientations towards 'landscape' and 'nature' among different people involved with a natural burial ground, and within the same individual across time.

Working across different sites, we found that signage and other features installed by site owners/managers might be augmented by more complex markings made by bereaved visitors at their relative or friend's grave – irrespective of the site's commitment to environmentally friendly body disposal (see Woodthorpe, 2010, for a parallel example in a cemetery). As Tilley (2006: 7) argues: 'landscapes are contested, worked and re-worked by people according to particular individual, social and political circumstances.'

What we contend is that the evidence of contestations and re-workings we secured reflects the distinction between: (1) monocular perspectives on the landscape as panoramic, something fixed and distant from the body, and (2) binocular vision as 'movement and knowledge [of the landscape] gained from a co-ordinated use of the senses in carrying out various tasks' (Olwig, 2008: 81). While for Olwig both these perspectives refer to landscape, for Ingold (2000) it is the latter which approximates to his concern with dwelling in or belonging to the landscape. Contestations within the natural burial ground often reflect tensions between those for whom it constitutes a landscape and those for whom it is a taskscape. Moreover, what constitutes the 'task' may differ between individuals working at or visiting the same burial ground. And indeed, their potentially divergent positions can change in relation to one another across time. We illustrate this point, first, through data from two interviews with burial ground owners/managers.

Greg Hurst,² a former cemetery manager who established the first UK natural burial ground, described his *changing* relationship with his working environment during his career. Starting as a gardener in the 1960s, he recalled scything back vegetation, in this way safeguarding wildflowers, insects, birds and mammals. A decade later, however, less labour-intensive methods took over and a manicured appearance became the norm, mechanisms which ushered in a more panoramic cemetery landscape – and thus amended the taskscape he had previously experienced. He said:

I suddenly realised that through the 60s, I was in the chemical spraying team, we sprayed that old cemetery, took out all the wild flowers, all the scabious, all the insects and butterflies disappeared, all the voles disappeared and the place now is as dead as a dodo.

For him, then, nature had been confirmed as a generative force or breeding ground, akin to the pre-17th-century perspectives that Olwig (1993b) discusses. At the natural burial ground he established, lines of locally-grown memorial oaks mark the burial sites, mirroring the gridded layout of the cemetery it abuts. Thus, the burial landscape's visual and affective dimensions are subordinated to an ecological agenda; access to individual graves was not designed into this setting and may dwindle as vegetation proliferates.

By contrast, Tim Noble, a funeral director and owner of a natural burial ground, was committed to enhancing consumers' choice. He referred to having 'environmental leanings', yet when selecting a field in which to bury the dead with a tree to mark the spot, his criteria included 'a tranquil setting', 'a nice place for people to come to'. His choice of a 3-acre ploughed field reflected his belief that 'too big is not going to feel nice', as in the example of 'big Victorian urban cemeteries'. To facilitate consumer choice and control, he initially consulted regularly with the friends' group he set up for the site. However, he said:

Obviously that's been a very difficult experience at times because we found that there's very divergent wishes amongst that community about what they want it to be and we kind of, I wouldn't say try to tread the middle ground, but we've tried to encourage people to think about the longer vision ... to forget about these things which are fairly inconsequential.

By this he meant

artefacts on graves, small artefacts on graves, obviously big artefacts on graves then, you know, we've got big problems with straight away, you know, but small artefacts on graves that are few in number, you know, we could live with.

He continued:

Some people find things you might see on Blackpool Pleasure Beach stuck on a grave very disturbing, other people find wind chimes disturbing, but other people say wind chimes are great, some say they disturb the birds ... I don't think they disturb the birds, I think birds have worked out this wind chime doesn't do any harm.

By contrast with Greg, then, for Tim the natural burial ground landscape was something to look at, a 'nice place to come to'. 'Nature' was not the outcome of ecological practices,

but something that could absorb ‘artefacts on graves’: ‘the birds ... have worked out this wind chime doesn’t do any harm.’ In sum, Tim’s initial vision had parallels with the notion of landscape as scenery to be viewed, a monocular perspective requiring minimal intervention on his part.

These perspectives apparently represent a fixed opposition. Yet both these participants’ views reflected, and were reflected in, their changing *practices*: Greg’s single-minded commitment to ecological issues arose from changing approaches to burial ground gardening; Tim’s commitment to choice at a time of bereavement had been modified as some bereaved people’s gardening and memorialization practices turned his landscape of choice into a taskscape, one not of his, or other bereaved people’s making. We now pursue these points through data from a charitable trust site, one of the four selected for ethnographic work, detailing the challenges of reconciling competing perspectives on landscape and nature within a shared site.

‘Down and dirty in a hole, in the middle of the trees’

For Tom Adams, the site manager, natural burial was an opportunity for people to get ‘down and dirty in a hole’. He believed that embodied engagement with the landscape had therapeutic potential, something missing from conventional service provision, which, implicitly, reflected a separated, surface-oriented position towards the burial ground (Bender, 1993). The 6-acre site he managed lay within 50 acres of mixed woodland owned by the trust. Opened in 2001, it had been a conifer plantation with some broadleaf trees. Now it was managed with the aim of establishing a habitat-rich native woodland by thinning trees and creating a mixed understorey. Without a sign, fencing or gateways, only markings on dedicated trees revealed its mortuary purpose. Intervention in this landscape by the manager and his volunteers reflected an environmental rather than memorializing agenda.

Creating native woodland in this way represented a commitment to establishing and sustaining an ‘unspoilt’ landscape that resembled what might have come before. When describing the Andalusian government’s similar commitment, one which involved emptying the land of miners and mining, farmers and farming, Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009: 158) argue that

the official, scientific and technical discourse trains its gaze on the landscape and sees the human presence as an accident. The fundamental aspect, which must be valued, is precisely the substratum (nature) ‘prior’ to human action (unnatural). The dominant myth of nature demands the search for the ‘primitive’, the untransformed ... It is this ‘unspoilt nature’, barely touched, that they wish to preserve and protect from the industrial, construction and agricultural processes of the 21st century.

While Ingold (2000: 198) cites the temporality of movement as constitutive of landscape, ‘a pattern of activities “collapsed” into an array of features’, the apparent solidity of earth and vegetation is an affordance (Gibson, 1979) that nonetheless helps it to be seen as amenable to preservation and a potential return to an unspoilt state, i.e. uncontaminated by human intervention. Paradoxically, as at the charitable trust site, this dimension of

landscape is often brought about precisely through human activity. This, to an extent, then, is the perspectival view of nature and landscape as something to own and gaze upon, even if that view is made to emerge through human intervention.

If we ask how the absence of a relative or friend, through death, materializes in the potentially ‘unspoilt’ landscape of the charitable trust site, we may find only underground processes of bodily decomposition, its slow merger with the surrounding earth ‘mediating the absent thing as a stand-in, a surrogate or proxy’ (Bille et al., 2010: 10). Above ground is a habitat-rich native woodland with no conventional associations with death. This dichotomy parallels the notions of the beautiful landscape espoused by the Danish Nature Preservation Society, informed by the aesthetic of landscape painting; by contrast, the ‘fetid flat lowland swamp (which is) likely to have greater ecological importance (e.g. as a breeding ground)’ is excluded from this view (Olwig, 1993b: 94). Indeed, Olwig explicitly links ‘breeding’, or birth, with death, both being associated with decay or corruption, the source and destination of human life. While we are not arguing that the presence of bodies beneath the ground is actively denied or treated as a focus for ‘horror and fascination’, as Bataille (cited in Olwig, 1993b: 101) puts it, the burial ground bears no permanent markers of burial sites beyond the manager’s system of grave co-ordinates. Further, bereaved people are discouraged from spending ‘over long’ at a relative or friend’s burial spot. What our data also show, however, are the more ambiguous or illicit ways in which bereaved people nonetheless mark and make legible the setting’s mortuary meaning.

The matter of death

Greg Hurst described the conventional municipal cemetery as a site where the natural world is held in stasis: grass clipped, trees and shrubs pruned, and tarmac, masonry and gravel sealing the earth from rainfall and spreading vegetation. By contrast, the natural burial ground is designed to lead clients and visitors into a dynamic environment of growth and decay, more closely resembling Ingold’s (2000: 201) account of the world as ‘not anything we can look at but a process we are part of’. Yet the ways in which bereaved people and other visitors may be ‘part of’ this landscape, their contribution to it as a taskscape, become evident only through careful scrutiny of what they say and do.

Thus, the new glades in the charitable trust site’s conifer plantation and broadleaf plantings were not the only marks being made within this taskscape. Bereaved people were planting into the earth above a friend or relative’s corpse, leaving flowers, small statues and other personal items. Although Amanda Thornton, whose father was buried there, likened natural burial to alternative healthcare, using phrases like ‘unmeddled with’, ‘simple’, ‘not mucking around with things’, Mick Ellis, whose partner was interred at the site, described people ‘writing great big names and putting things on (graves) and bordering them up with all the great big white chalk’. At first he too ‘did the thing that everybody else does and bordered it and made it look like you could see it from space’. In other words, bereaved people were using the local white chalk to indicate the site’s mortuary purpose, making their absent friend or relative present by marking out their name, along with the materiality of their corpse delineated through a stony border set on the ground above it. Below ground too, the remains of the dead were

extended beyond the body, its clothing often accessorized with highly personal items that offered little to the organic environment. Yet, as indicated, site policy restricted markers of the dead to the manager's record of grave co-ordinates and the planting of native plant species near the burial spot. Thus, while both the dead and their relatives and friends were allowed into this environment, their presence was stayed. Although Ingold (2000) refutes the possibility of human beings standing outside a landscape that they then, cognitively, 'construct' according to their own values and agendas, this site's taskscape was designed to operate 'around', but *without*, the direct involvement of mourners or the dead – even though our data attest to bereaved people undertaking all kinds of mortuary practices. The participation *intended* by the manager, however, involved physical and emotional transformation: the dead were reduced to invisible flesh and bone that mingled with the site's earthy substrate; bereaved people, whilst helped to participate in the burial, were only later recruited as volunteers to help transform this mortuary site into a 'native woodland', and in the process potentially transformed emotionally, from primarily grief-stricken to more productive individuals.

Landscape contested

This article responds to the call by Bille et al. (2010: 4) for attention to 'the mutual interdependence in people's lives of the materially present and the materially absent', offering an account of a burial landscape where the material absences generated by death do not seem to stand in a relationship of 'mutual interdependence' with what is conventionally 'materially present' in churchyards and cemeteries. The mortuary nature of the natural burial ground *may* be apparent at the grave – but only just. At the charitable trust site, bereaved people did embed memorializing objects into the earth above the grave, or conceal them in undergrowth. Whether or not recruited as volunteers to help sustain the native woodland, they often cut back brambles around the grave, so differentiating it from its immediate 'overgrown' surroundings. In Tim Noble's burial ground, where his commitment to consumer choice meant that, initially at least, small artefacts on graves were something 'we could live with', bereaved people complained when tall grasses and annuals impeded access. As Tim said, 'people just thought the whole place had been neglected rather than it was an active management regime of non-intervention', a distinction that reflects Andalusian farmers' perceptions of nature as something *created* (Ruiz-Ballesteros et al., 2009).

What complicates bereaved people's relatively covert 'dwelling' perspective, however, is that alongside a binocular vision, 'gained from a coordinated use of the senses in doing various tasks' (Olwig, 2008: 84), data from all ethnographic sites also show people subscribing to a surface-oriented, monocular landscape of unspoilt vistas. Like the Danish Nature Preservation Society, they espoused aesthetically beautiful landscapes, the 'peace', 'tranquillity' and 'freedom' of sunny glades and open aspects, touristic vistas of a beautiful countryside. Davies (1995) offers the term 'ecological immortality' to describe the future offered through natural burial if heaven no longer persuades, nor memory suffices. Our project asked to what extent people who chose natural burials were ecologically motivated. Evidence suggested that the 'nice place' or 'lovely landscape' some participants described was what mattered when creating, choosing and

visiting such a site; its ecological credentials weighed less heavily. Thus, what they were buying into when choosing natural burial – and a particular site – resembles ‘the nature areas which environmentalists seek to preserve’, the same landscapes which are ‘coveted for golf courses, resort hotels, corporate headquarters and the like’ (Olwig, 1993b: 99). Indeed, the appeal of the vista and the panoramic landscape, its association with ownership, particularly by the members of higher and more ‘cultured’ classes, has been recognized by some natural burial ground providers. For example, one company states on its website:

We work in tandem with landowners and estates who have multi-generational interests in the land, a wealth of experience and local knowledge. They also own some of the most outstandingly beautiful land in the country which we now share.

The panoramic landscape which Olwig (2008) associates with ownership thus resonates with the choices of families and friends choosing natural burials. Similarly, in the municipal cemetery, although burial rights are purchased for a limited period, a sense of inalienable ownership can infuse bereaved people’s attitudes to the grave. As Francis et al. (2005: 83) argue: ‘the financial investment entailed in purchasing burial rights and the creative involvement in tending and maintaining a grave and memorial garden gave mourners stakeholder status.’ At the farm site where we did ethnographic field-work, Ed and Malcolm Sudbury, brothers in their 50s, had buried their mother. When asked about their relationship with this landscape, they said:

Yeah, not that we own it, but it just feels ... how we’ve ended up here and we, we seem to know that our bodies are going somewhere that’s local that we feel comfortable about with ... finally there’s roots that have been put down.

However, as suggested, bereaved people were reluctant to stand back from the landscapes of contemplation they had bought into. While they often deplored the ‘tat’ and ‘bling’ other mourners left upon graves, ‘spoiling’ the ‘unspoilt’ vista they had chosen, for many the natural burial landscape also remained a taskscape which had death and the dead as its focus – and data, below, from the charitable trust site, reveal bereaved people’s contradictory orientations towards this burial landscape.

As argued, in response to what is materially absent – the living relative or friend – bereaved people may unofficially or illicitly make present a mediating ‘stand-in, a surrogate or proxy’ (Bille et al., 2010: 10), plantings, objects, cleared brambles. Equally, they may submit to a social and, indeed, life course transition, their ‘master status’ (Becker, 1963) shifting from ‘bereaved person’ to ‘site volunteer’. To reveal the *complexities* of what this landscape meant to them, we return to the work of Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. among miners and farmers. Seeking to interpret their engagement with landscapes they once worked, Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009: 163) cite the contribution of affectivity to engagement, arguing that, for them ‘the inscription of memory on the environment endows the perception of the environment with evocation and melancholy, sustaining an engagement with it.’

The mix of current estrangement and remembered participation described by these authors evokes bereaved people’s capacity to feel a similar combination of painful

distance from the remembered, embodied self of someone now dead, along with a sometimes driving desire to embed themselves in the place where that person's remains are interred. The miners and farmers among whom Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009) worked were indeed estranged from the landscapes they were nonetheless engaged with – and, as noted, these authors refer to a transition from taskscape to landscape. In the natural burial ground, however, these positions can coincide: bereaved people, for the reasons cited, demonstrate the monocular, distanced vision that Olwig (2008) describes, enjoying the panoramic view. Yet simultaneously, they experience grief, a sense of separation from the life they shared with the deceased and, as our data show, for them this landscape could *remain* a taskscape where intense, embodied connection with a partner or child was materialized in other ways. In the parallel example of the cemetery, one visitor said:

The garden is the memorial ... it requires a close degree of attention and maintenance; it requires a large degree of commitment. The stone is merely a document ... With our grave, the stone is the document and the garden the memorial. (Francis et al., 2005: 118)

As the site continued to fill, we found newly bereaved people viewing it through both monocular and binocular visions of landscape. Issues of ownership, engagement, affectivity, distance and loss enmeshed in their responses to burying someone in this way. For Mick Ellis, for example, it was a chance to fulfil his longstanding desire to own land to live, die and be buried in. Like the ambiguous sense of 'ownership' that Francis et al. (2005) document in the municipal cemetery, for Mick, the deed of burial he received meant that 'I own a little piece of this part of the country.' Entire afternoons disappeared as Mick, with roll-ups, flask and dog, sat talking to his partner, Alex, at her grave. Yet their dwelling occurred within a context where other orientations towards the landscape pertained. The charitable trust, in the person of Tom Adams, the burial ground manager, restricted Mick's control of his 'property', constraining how he marked it. Over time, however, Tom recruited Mick as a volunteer and Mick later said that by working on the land he was 'hoping that I actually end up shaping this place a little bit'. With his master status transformed from 'bereaved person' to 'volunteer', Mick nonetheless anticipated joining Alex in the adjacent plot he had pre-purchased, 'another reason why I hope that I influence a bit of the woodland round here', he said. So the taskscape Mick dwelt in involved different senses of landscape: the creation of 'native woodland', arguably a form of 'unspoiled landscape' that other burial ground users could 'contemplate', yet a landscape achievable only through his intervention, under Tom's guidance. Moreover, despite his transformed status, the site remained a landscape of affect that Mick would eventually become one with, closing the aching bodily gap between himself and Alex.

Mick had been introduced by the manager to his 'neighbour', Ros Eastman. Like Alex, her partner, Brian, had also died of liver disease and their bodies were buried near one another. Ros described how she and Mick thought: 'Wow, they can swap notes on liver complaints. This is so cool.' Social connections intimately bound up with the materialities of adjacent bodies and plots also extended into a wider landscape. Initially, as

mentioned, Mick marked off his property, his 'soulmate's' body, with a flint boundary. Ros followed suit. But as she said:

Unfortunately, I mean you're not supposed to demarcate the graves, which is difficult, that is a bit hard, I see their reasoning, but we thought, well, it's natural, but other people abused this and poor Tom [manager] was getting [laughs] large flint cairns being built with really big rocks.

Yet, despite sharing 'their reasoning', Ros only removed every other flint, as did Mick. Potentially a source of conflict between opposing views of the same stones, as months passed their intervention meshed with larger processes of seasonal change. As Ros explained: 'There's a few there, but you can't see them now because there's leaves all over them.'

The temporality of landscape

Similar data were gathered at Tim Noble's site, although here we traced longer-term materializations of absence through a 2-year longitudinal photographic study. It was a site where consumer choice was privileged, with less emphasis on ecological concerns. Figure 1 reveals this landscape's temporality, one that reflects more than just the fluctuating expression of individual grief. As such, it echoes Bleyen's (2010) account of a mother bereaved of her neonatal son who recorded the 'evolution' of his grave as seasons and objects changed. Read alongside other ethnographic data, Figure 1 reveals the intersection of competing perspectives on the burial ground landscape and how they were articulated and made manifest, both by different bereaved people and the funeral director himself:

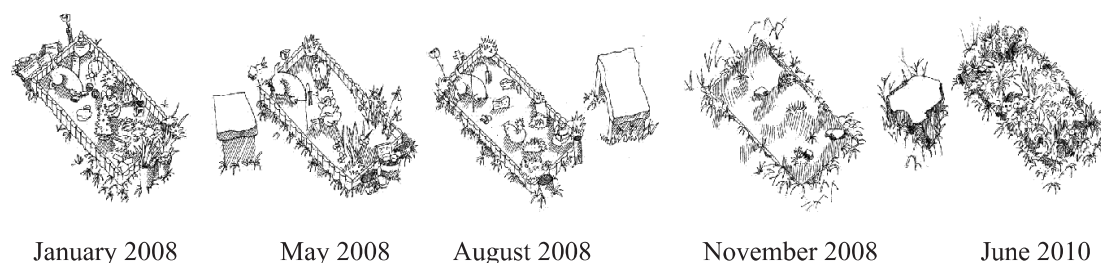


Figure 1. Five images that chart processes of change in the materialization of absence at one grave site.

The image for January 2008 shows one particular grave shortly after the burial and includes cards, flower decorations and a Christmas tree. No tree had been planted on this grave as it was double depth and the tree would be planted only after the final burial. Images for May and August 2008 show the introduction and relocation of the imitation stone bench, plus other new items and their repositioning, for example, the chicken. Between images 3 and 4, burial ground regulations were reasserted, permitting only a memorial plaque laid flat on the grave. The bench is removed and the grave curtilage made less evident through a build-up of soil. This followed complaints made to Tim Noble by other bereaved people about the proliferation of artefacts on graves, which prompted him to remind everyone of the site regulations. The final image (June 2010)

shows the grave again being managed more actively after a period of inactivity; plants replace cut flowers and stones. A large boulder, probably unearthed as a nearby grave was dug, now replaces the bench.

Conclusion

In making sense of the natural burial ground as a site at which the absences introduced by a death may be experienced, we have drawn on the work of Bille et al. (2010: 3–4) that describes environments where ‘absent elements are sensuously, emotionally and ideationally present to people, and are articulated or materialized in various ways’. It has been our task to discover how this occurs when conventional articulations or materializations of these absences are deliberately eschewed, leading us to examine the histories of different yet persistent understandings of the landscape and of nature. These relate to the emergence of practices such as landscape painting, the establishment of stately homes and tourism. We have drawn on Olwig’s (2008) notion of a monocular, fixed position vis-à-vis the environment, one that in our view has contributed to social science perspectives arguing that human beings ‘construct’ the landscape from an independent, cognitively-based position. While Ingold’s (2000) work robustly critiques this position, the naturalization or ‘heritagization’ of the landscape has resulted in a *materially grounded* estrangement between human beings and their environment, albeit one often occurring via human intervention.

These sources have allowed us to address questions about a ‘natural’ burial landscape that eschews the traditional material culture of gravestones, chapels and cemetery walls. Ruiz-Ballesteros et al. (2009) argue that the taskscape they refer to, the working and worked environment, can be naturalized and so become landscape rather than taskscape. Ingold’s concern with the temporality of the landscape and his use of the term ‘taskscape’ in this context suggest something rather different: an environment within which different senses of the landscape both co-exist *and* interact with one another – as in the case of the charitable trust site and the site owned by the funeral director. As Ingold (2000: 198) says, ‘*the landscape as a whole must likewise be understood as the taskscape in its embodied form: a pattern of activities “collapsed” into an array of features*’ (original emphasis).

If material culture studies has prioritized presence, the capacity of what is *there* to act upon and interact with society’s human members (Bille et al., 2010), this article has helped redress the balance, asking what happens when the absences generated by a death are not enmeshed within the UK’s conventional mortuary culture, where familiar objects and spaces themselves are absent. Our data show that a burial ground without many of the markers of a mortuary purpose customary in churchyards and cemeteries offers multiple readings and forms of engagement. Bereaved people and site owners/managers approach it from a range of different perspectives. In both their cases, a panoramic, surface-oriented view of landscape can sit in uneasy proximity to a landscape of belonging, a taskscape that can both undermine and also enable the presence of all that a death has put paid to, someone’s embodied life, their social participation and the emotional equilibrium of bereaved relatives and friends.

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Notes

1. A further 30+ sites are currently at the proposal/planning stage.
2. All personal names used are pseudonyms.

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