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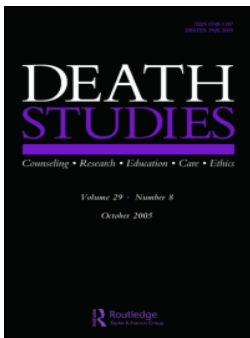
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The ambiguity of human ashes: Exploring encounters with cremated remains in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This article explores cremation and disposal practices in the Netherlands, focusing on the attitudes and experiences of bereaved Dutch people in relation to cremated remains. In academic and professional narratives, human ashes are commonly described as “important,” as “sacred,” and as a vehicle to continue intense and physical relationships with the dead. Based on quantitative and qualitative data this article illustrates the ambiguity of such relationships. It highlights the diverse experiences, unexpected challenges, and moral obligations that can be evoked by the deceased’s ashes, where the latter are seen as embedded in material practices and entangled in social relationships.

Elaborate research on ritualizing cremation has illustrated the animate nature of human ashes, through which the bereaved negotiate the absence-presence of the deceased in diverse ways and in various spaces (Heessels, Poots, & Venbrux, 2012; Maddrell, 2013; Prendergast, Hockey, & Kellaher, 2006). Cremated remains have the potential to evoke physical and intense relationships with the dead, as they provide a focus for memorialization and for conversation with the deceased (Heessels, 2012). Objects that incorporate human ashes are thus not merely seen as objects but acquire a certain power and agency similar to that of the living. Partly, this is due to their highly ambiguous materiality. Prendergast et al. (2006) have drawn attention to the ambiguity of cremated remains in form and in relation to the materiality of the body. Human ashes are both fluid and dry, which gives them the potential for private disposal, portability, and division. Furthermore, the ashes belong to the person as well as to the corpse but do not resemble either. They condense and transcend the qualities of the previous life. In cremated remains, the distinction between person and thing becomes blurred (Miller & Parrot, 2009). As a result, human ashes have the potential to play a central role in ritualizing relationships between the living and the dead, and are often set apart as special or sacred.

In the Dutch context, postcremation ritualizations are described as important by many bereaved. Furthermore, highly professionalized funerary enterprises are actively involved and have an interest in promoting

and facilitating creative disposal practices. In line with earlier research, our empirical data evidence many examples of intense relationships with human remains. However, encounters in the field have also evoked questions about the diverse ways in which people value the material residue of the corpse. During meetings with funeral professionals, the question was raised why an increasing number of people do not retrieve the ashes from the crematorium. Also, besides describing vivid relationships, people’s accounts indicated a rather practical and inevitable component to disposal practices. Something has to be done with the remains. However, for those involved it can be difficult to arrive at a decision, and when a decision is made its implementation can present challenges. In other words, the relationship with cremated remains can be less straightforward, less positive, and more dynamic than is often assumed.

Drawing on both quantitative as well as qualitative data, the present study describes attitudes and practices of recently bereaved people in relation to cremated remains. First, the Dutch context and the methods of the study will be discussed. Second, we will quantitatively explore attitudes of the bereaved toward the ashes of their deceased loved ones. We will investigate associations between these attitudes and cremation motives, the practice of witnessing the cremation, and ash disposals. Third, we will look at qualitative illustrations of people’s diverse encounters with cremated remains. We will conclude with some final remarks and suggestions for further research.

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Cremation practices in the Netherlands

Dutch funerary practices have become increasingly personalized since the 1960s, and a massive decline of traditional ways of dealing with death and dying can be observed, linked with the changing role of religion in society (Venbrux, Quartier, Venhorst, & Mathijssen, 2013). According to a 2015 survey, 70% of the Dutch describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated (Bernts & Berghuijs, 2016). Similar to other countries in Western Europe, the deceased and the bereaved have become the central focus of funerary rites, rather than God or a religious inheritance. In the Netherlands the process of secularization has occurred simultaneously with the development of modern cremation. Officially, the option has been provided regarding funeral practices since the legalization of cremation in 1955. More crematoria were built, literally providing space to conduct funerals in personal ways, and a variety of entrepreneurs became involved. Since then the funerary landscape has become extremely professionalized.

The professionalization of the funerary landscape is a distinctive feature of the Dutch context and is fundamental to understanding the contemporary ways of dealing with death. In the Netherlands there are three large and many small and medium-sized enterprises that arrange the practical aspects of the funeral, covering a wide range of facilities. In 2014, 80 crematoria existed and 61.5% of funerals involved a cremation; and these numbers are increasing (Pharos International, 2015, p. 32). Over two thirds of Dutch people have funeral insurance, mostly with one of the three large companies, which means that people are generally covered for basic funeral costs (Venbrux, Peelen, & Altena, 2009). In practice this implies that funeral arrangements are highly organized and structured. In the Netherlands this is essential, in comparison, for example, to the United Kingdom, because cremation or burial has to take place on the sixth working day after death at the latest. Following the cremation, the crematorium is obliged by law to retain the cremated remains. After approximately 3 weeks, the bereaved receive a letter about the possibility to retrieve the ashes. One month after the cremation, people are allowed to obtain the ashes and actual disposal possibilities emerge. In practice the ashes are often claimed later, as more time can be needed to decide on the mode as well as the temporary or permanent site of disposal (cf. Kellaher, Hockey, & Prendergast, 2010).

The wide range of possibilities for ash disposals in the Netherlands can be considered a recent development. Prior to the 1980s ash disposals were mainly conducted by professionals, but since then the

immediate family of the deceased has become more involved (Heessels et al., 2012). In 1991, permission was granted to take the ashes home, and the Burial and Cremation Act was again amended 7 years later. Having for a while been merely tolerated, ash disposals were now officially permitted and people were allowed to scatter the ashes and divide them in parts. As a result the market surrounding postcremation ritualizations prospered. Urns, scatter tubes, objects, jewelry, paintings, and tattoos have slowly become popular and have been promoted and facilitated by entrepreneurs and artists (Heessels et al., 2012). Legislation and the corresponding developments within the Dutch funerary landscape have thus had a distinct influence on the disposal practices of the bereaved.

Methods

This article is based on mixed-methods research conducted between 2012 and 2016. It draws on semi-structured interviews with Dutch bereaved ($n = 15$) and ritual experts ($n = 20$), observations of funerals ($n = 20$), and participant observations in two funeral homes and a crematorium (total of 6 months), as well as a survey among Dutch bereaved ($n = 198$). For this article, the interviews with the bereaved and the survey are most important and will now be discussed in detail.

Interviews

The interviewees were seven males and eight females between the ages of 34 and 84 who had recently (less than a year previously) lost a loved one and who were in charge of the funerary practices. The funerals in which people had been involved were either nonecclesial ($n = 5$), Roman-Catholic ($n = 5$), or Protestant ($n = 5$). The interviews were semistructured, following a specific guide that was altered for each interview, based on the specific context of each case and the outcomes of the earlier interviews (Heldens & Reysoo, 2005). Participants were contacted via ritual experts or directly through my fieldwork at the funeral home. The interviews were conducted at the homes of the interviewees, and what started as a strategy to create a comfortable, safe interview setting became much more. During the interviews a space was created that illustrated and evoked the absence-presence of the deceased, and objects of the dead, including ash objects that incorporate human matter, became part of the narratives of the bereaved (cf. Valentine, 2008). After introductions, people were invited to tell their story of losing their loved one. We often started with illness or anticipation of death, and moved through the funerary

practices to the present moment in time. The mode of death differed among the interviewees, and in some cases a long period of illness had occurred prior to death. Reflecting the differences in experiences, the duration of the interviews varied between 2 and 3.5 hours. The interviews have been transcribed, coded, and analyzed by the interviewer.

Survey: Sampling and data collection

A survey ($n = 198$) was developed on the basis of the interviews and (participant) observations. Like the interview guides, the survey consisted of questions about people's experiences of losing their loved one. The most important criterion to include people in our sample was their involvement with the deceased and with the funerary practices. As our goal is not to make generalizations about the Dutch but rather to explore dynamics in the process of loss, we deliberately focused on people who were directly, closely, and recently involved with the funeral. Respondents had participated in arrangements and decisions regarding the funerary practices: from writing cards, to the ceremony itself, and to practices of disposal. They had been closely attached to the deceased, and 70% of the funerals had taken place 3 to 8 weeks prior to the survey. These criteria are important with regard to the situational appropriation of beliefs and practices, attitudes toward bonds with the dead, as well as human remains.

To reach this group of respondents people were approached in two ways: through a funeral company and through ministers. Overall, 166 usable questionnaires were collected via the first approach (response rate 69%). The Roman-Catholic slant of the selected funeral company resulted in an underrepresentation of Protestant respondents in the sample. After initial analysis it was therefore decided to draw on a random sample ($n = 250$) of congregations of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. The ministers of these municipalities were contacted, and 41% indicated that they could not cooperate in the research, mostly because they had not recently been involved in a funeral service. Others asked members of their congregation; as a result, 32 more questionnaires were retrieved (response rate 13%).

Participants

The respondents were intimately involved with the deceased ($M = 4.85$, $SD = .47$; on a 5-point scale). Most of them had recently lost their partner (29%) or a parent (55%). Among the respondents, 52% were female and 48% were male. The oldest participant was born in

1925, the youngest in 1988 ($Q1 = 1946$, $Q2 = 1955$, $Q3 = 1963$). As for education, 35% of our respondents had a low, 29% an average, and 36% a high level of education; and 59% described themselves as religiously affiliated (43% Catholic, 16% Protestant). Here, one must take into account the age distribution of the sample. We did not differentiate between categories such as atheist or agnostic in the group of non-affiliated respondents. Although most respondents are religiously affiliated, they don't self-identify with being religious in general ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.15$). Taking frequencies into account, 49% of the respondents identified as not religious, 19% as religious, and 32% scored neutral.

In addition to the social location of respondents, we looked at the characteristics of the funerals in which they had participated. Overall, 67% of the funerals were non-ecclesial ceremonies (63% hall of the crematorium, 4% other location) and 33% were ecclesial (25% only in church, 8% also in the hall of the crematorium). We focused on recently held funerals since people are confronted with choices surrounding ash disposal shortly after the ceremony. Cremation was involved in 70% of the funerals. Taking religious affiliation into account, we see that 81% of the unaffiliated respondents were involved in a cremation, 75% of Catholics, and 28% of Protestants.

Measuring instruments and data analysis

Regarding cremated remains, several items were constructed based on the theoretical framework and, most importantly, were grounded in the observations and interviews. We asked participants to rate eight motives for opting for either a burial or cremation, using a 5-point scale. Furthermore, we examined what respondents planned to do with the ashes or had done with them. Seven yes-no options were provided and people had the option to tick several boxes. Also, they were given the opportunity to add other forms of disposal. Third, we included two three-item questions to measure attitudes toward the cremated remains and the grave. "The grave/urn/ashes are important to me," "I consider the grave/urn/ashes as special or sacred," and "The grave/urn/ashes evoke the feeling that the deceased is with me." We again used a 5-point scale. In all questions particular attention was given to the language of the interviewees, to make sure that formulations would be as close to common speech as possible. The response options were also grounded in the fieldwork.

Concerning procedure, we first conducted a reliability analysis on the items that measured people's attitudes toward cremated remains as well as the grave,

to provide context and allow for comparison. Second, we used the Kruskal-Wallis test with Mann-Whitney post hoc tests to compare these attitudes by religious affiliation. After describing people's motives and choices regarding cremation and ash disposal we then conducted bivariate analyses (Spearman's rho). In this way we explored associations between people's attitudes toward cremated remains and cremation motives, people's presence at the actual cremation, and forms of ash disposal.

Quantitative explorations

Attitudes toward the cremated remains and the grave

Based on the two three-item questions we constructed two scales, one on attitudes toward the grave ($\alpha = .72$) and one regarding cremated remains ($\alpha = .95$). Respondents answered either the burial ($n = 58$) or the cremation questions ($n = 133$), depending on the type of funeral in which they had participated. The results show a moderate positive attitude toward the grave ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.01$). Contrary to our expectations we found a neutral attitude toward the cremated remains ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.27$).

Attitudes toward the grave and toward cremated remains were significantly affected by religious affiliation, $H_{\text{grave}}(2) = 14.19$, $p < .001$ and $H_{\text{crem}}(2) = 10.97$, $p < .01$. Roman-Catholic respondents valued both categories the highest. The results show slightly positive attitudes toward cremated remains ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.26$) and highly positive attitudes toward the grave ($M = 4.3$, $SD = .69$). For Protestants we found slightly positive attitudes toward the grave ($M = 3.3$, $SD = .91$), but negative attitudes toward the cremated remains ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.12$). The results of the group of religiously unaffiliated respondents reflected a neutral attitude toward the grave ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 1.13$) and a slightly negative attitude toward the cremated remains ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.19$). To compare the significant findings by religious affiliation, we used Mann-Whitney post hoc tests with a Bonferroni correction ($p < .167$). Catholic respondents valued the grave significantly higher than Protestants ($U = 89$, $p < .01$) and unaffiliated respondents ($U = 63.5$, $p < .01$). We did not find a significant difference between the last two groups. Regarding the cremated remains the attitudes of Catholic respondents were significantly more positive than those of Protestant ($U = 109$, $p < .01$) and unaffiliated respondents ($U = 1456.5$, $p < .01$). Again no significant difference between Protestant and unaffiliated respondents was found ($U = 156.5$, $p < .05$).

Some of the results are in line with our expectations. We anticipated a higher appreciation of the grave in comparison with cremated remains among religiously affiliated respondents, as Christian commitment to modern cremation practices has been relatively late and the liturgical language and ritual structure have essentially remained focused on burial (Davies, 2008, p. 143; Mathijssen, 2014, p. 139). Looking at attitudes toward cremated remains between groups, the results evidence a higher appreciation of the cremated remains among Catholics than Protestants. Possible explanations are the intermediary relationships between the living and the dead, and the Catholic familiarity with ritual objects and reliquaries (Greely, 2000). However, we did not expect neutral attitudes toward cremated remains in general, neither did we anticipate the slightly negative attitudes of unaffiliated respondents. The low agreement in the unaffiliated group is particularly remarkable if one considers the high number of people who chose a cremation in this group (81%). Furthermore, these results are surprising in relation to the professionalized funerary culture that facilitates and promotes postcremation rituals.

Cremation motives

Exploring people's motives in choosing a cremation can further increase our understanding of people's attitudes toward cremated remains. Based on the qualitative material, eight cremation motives could be formulated. The results show that the decision to choose a cremation strongly originated from the deceased person ($M = 4.6$, $SD = .84$). The possibilities surrounding ash disposal were also considered a motive to opt for cremation ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.32$). Third, the absence of grave maintenance was identified as a reason for making this decision ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.28$). In many interviews the bereaved expressed a concern for other family members in maintaining the grave, or the deceased had expressed such a concern. The other cremation motives were not identified as decisive: the idea of burial as unpleasant ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.30$), other cremated family members and friends ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.34$), the environment ($M = 2.6$, $SD = 1.32$), financial aspects ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 1.15$), and religious motives ($M = 1.6$, $SD = .83$).

To understand how people's considerations relate to their attitudes toward cremated remains, we conducted a bivariate analysis. We found one moderate, significant association. Respondents who had chosen a cremation because of the possibilities surrounding ash disposal valued the cremated remains as more important ($r_s = .25$, $p < .01$).

Witnessing the cremation

In the Netherlands an increasing number of close relatives choose to witness the actual cremation of the deceased (i.e., the placement of the coffin in the cremation chamber). Crematoria have developed from technical nonplaces to symbolic places (Klaassens & Groote, 2014). Facilities are enhanced, taking symbolic meaning into account, and many undertakers and celebrants discuss the possibility of observing the cremation with the bereaved. In many crematoria, such as De Nieuwe Ooster in Amsterdam and Rijk van Nijmegen in Beuningen, adjustments have taken place to improve facilities to witness cremations. We wondered how the witnessing of the cremation itself influences people's attitudes toward the cremated remains. Of the respondents who had been involved with a cremation, 14% had been present during the placement of the coffin in the cremation chamber. They valued this as highly important ($M = 4.5$, $SD = .70$). Furthermore, the results show that people who viewed the actual cremation are likely to have more positive attitudes toward the cremated remains ($r_s = .27$, $p < .01$). This suggests that witnessing the actual cremation might strengthen the intimacy between the cremated remains and the bereaved (Davies & Mates, 2005, p. 58).

Ash disposal

Ash disposals occur in various forms and our results indicate that people often choose more than one way to dispose of the cremated remains. In our survey, 67% of respondents planned to conduct one form of ash disposal, 29% intended to dispose of the ashes in two ways, and 4% said they wanted to dispose of the ashes in three different forms. The most popular form of ash disposal among respondents was scattering (65%). Particularly interesting is the second largest group of people, who chose to create an ash object. In a 2006 national survey, ash objects were mentioned by 4% of the Dutch population, with a higher figure of 14% among younger respondents (Heessels et al., 2012, p. 468; Van Keulen and Kloosterboer, 2009). Almost a decade later, we find that 26% of our respondents choose this form of disposal. Third, we found that 17% of people wanted to bring the ashes home. In addition, 12% chose an urn grave. This also includes people who chose to place the ashes at the grave of another family member. Fifth, the results show a notable group of respondents (10%) who do not (yet) know what to do with the ashes at the time they are confronted with that choice. Sixth, we find a small group of

5% that identified with dividing the ashes in parts. This number should be interpreted with care, as nearly one third of respondents planned to conduct several ash disposals, and because some of the other means of disposal also imply a division of the cremated remains. One sees this most notably with ash objects. It is interesting, however, that only a few respondents seem to identify with the division of the ashes itself, even though this is one of the typical attributes of cremated remains. Last, we found that 4% of respondents were not planning to do anything with the ashes. Answers to the open question could be combined with the other response options. Although these numbers are exploratory they provide an interesting overview of the ways of disposal in the Netherlands, for which few prior figures exist.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is the question how various forms of disposal relate to people's attitudes toward the cremated remains. We conducted a bivariate analysis, and the results show four significant associations. We find a very strong association between highly valuing the ashes and keeping the ashes at home ($r_s = .46$, $p < .01$). Also, we find a strong association with ash objects ($r_s = .39$, $p < .01$). Respondents who choose to scatter the ashes express lower values toward the cremated remains: the results show a negative, strong association ($r_s = -.28$, $p < .01$). The last strong, negative association we find is with people who are not planning to do anything with the ashes ($r_s = -.30$, $p < .01$). This suggests a difference between forms of ash disposal that keep the dead in near proximity, and ways of disposal that "set the ashes free." Those who keep the ashes close describe the ashes as more important, sacred, and as a means of continuing their bonds with the dead. Those that let go of the ashes express less attachment and ascribe less value to the dead matter itself; however, this does not imply that the ashes are of no importance or symbolic value; neither does it take into account the meaning of the practice of scattering and the meaning of space. We will return to this in the next, qualitative, part of the article.

Qualitative illustrations

Encountering cremated remains

We have seen that people's attitudes toward cremated remains are diverse. Our observations and interviews suggest that the ashes removed from the crematorium, being both a dead object and a deceased subject (Troyer, 2007), can evoke peaceful, comfortable, and even joyful experiences, but also distressing and painful emotions. Most notably, however, the narratives of the interviewees

show that encounters with human remains are often confrontational and challenging (cf. Kellaher et al., 2010):

[Tim] was very present in the home ... When I felt desperate, he would tell me that everything would be all right. Exactly like he used to. And then he was standing there, smiling. It made me angry. I turned my back because I did not want to see him laughing anymore. ... Then, the next problem occurred. Tim was about to come home in a jar. But I didn't want him at home. I was really not going to. ... No, the idea of placing him here ... and I would start staring at it. (Jackie, 53)

Jackie gave a detailed account of the strong presence of her brother in her home after the funeral, which made her feel both comfortable and uncomfortable, even haunted, at the same time. When it became possible to retrieve the ashes from the crematorium, she did not want to have his remains nearby. Her account not only illustrates that the ashes have an ambiguous materiality and agency, describing them as “him” and “it”; it also evidences that human remains can prompt ambiguous experiences and challenges among the bereaved. The ashes confront the living with the deceased's absence as well as with his or her (un)expected presence, allowing for both experiences to oscillate. Although many people have ideas about the destination of human ashes, the reality of being confronted with one's loved one “in a jar” might be quite different than anticipated. The ashes may present a “problem” to the bereaved that has to be dealt with.

The confrontational relationships with the remains of the deceased illustrate a concern for both the final as well as the temporal destination of ashes. The cremated remains become an object of solicitude embedded in practices of the bereaved:

My wife wanted to be scattered near the place where she grew up, and where Nan was scattered as well. ... It was her final wish, but I wanted to keep her close at first. And I did not want to rush things. The last time we drove there we took her back home. (John, 59)

By “not wanting to rush things,” John expresses a discourse of care in which comfort can be found and through which significance is given to the remains (Valentine, 2008, pp. 130, 156). The bereaved are not only taking care of the deceased and the remains in their practices, but also in the decision-making processes that occur before people remove the ashes from the crematorium:

I don't want to keep him in an urn with me ... And my husband was a walker. [So I have decided] to scatter him in the park, close to the woods, so he can keep on walking there. I'm not looking forward to scattering his ashes. Actually it is an unpleasant idea. But it's just an idea, you know, that he walks there. [Of course it is

not real]. It means ... Yes, to get rid of the ashes. ... But he used to love it. Also, a lot of our family members lay there and I always make a story out of it, like: “Go and have a talk with [your brother], perhaps you will find each other.” (Anna, 77)

Anna's account shows that the postdeath identity of the deceased, as well as her husband's relationships with the other dead, are fundamental in the process of finding a space for his ashes. Although she has not performed the scattering yet, she is already attaching meaning to the practice and space of scattering by creating a narrative in which her husband can continue to walk and will be reunited with other family members. Not all bereaved retrieve the ashes from the crematorium; however, they sometimes also express a concern about the cremated remains when professionals conduct the disposal:

I did not want to be present at the scattering. Also, I didn't want an urn or [something] with his ashes. No fuss. [But what happened] was very unfortunate. They forgot to tell me when [my husband] would be scattered, so they set him free without me knowing. ... It was very sad. I would have loved to be with him in my mind. (Ria, 84)

The bereaved thus express care toward the cremated remains not only during the disposal itself, but also before a final destination is found, whether by leaving the ashes under the care of professionals or by finding a temporary place themselves. The ashes are entangled in social relationships, with the living as well as the (other) dead, and the identity of the deceased strongly determines the appropriateness of the place and time to dispose the ashes. As such, the ashes evoke a sense of social and moral obligation (Hertz, 1907, p. 27). While deciding on a fitting destination for the remains the survivors find themselves in a liminal phase (Kellaher et al., 2010), awaiting the final reintegration of the deceased (Heessels, 2012). This possibly explains the ambiguous, neutral attitudes toward the cremated remains amongst our survey respondents.

Ritualizing ash disposals: Creating distance and proximity

Because of their ambiguity in form, being both fluid and dry and therefore mobile, the ashes themselves provide a means to negotiate the confrontation with the absence-presence of the deceased that is evoked by the remains (Maddrell, 2013). Their ability to make the absent present increases their symbolic efficacy (Krmptich, Fontein, & Harries, 2010). The materiality of ashes not only creates possibilities to keep the human

remains in near proximity, but also provides ways to create and reinforce distance between the living and the dead. Our survey showed that cremated remains are less highly valued by people who scatter the remains. However, less agreement does not necessarily imply that the relationship is altogether empty of meaning. The practice of scattering has the potential to create significant places for the dead:

No, I didn't want [him at home]. He is in my heart. I thought: he has to go to Italy, to Lake Garda. ... He always loved the ocean so I said: "Go swimming. You have your freedom back. You have to go. Really, you have to get out of that tube." [...] Beautiful isn't it? ... If you look at the lake, you can see what a wonderful view he has. He is celebrating his holiday in Italy. (Jackie, 53)

Although Jackie described her initial encounter with Tim's remains as problematic, we see that the ashes become meaningful to her because of their potential to create freedom. Furthermore, by creating a space for Tim, she relocates the focus for memory and continuing relationships with her brother to a place outside of the home, rebalancing his overt presence in her everyday life. Moreover, the act of scattering gives her the possibility to fulfill Tim's wishes. Before he fell ill, he had always loved to swim and had dreamt of spending his old age in Italy. By scattering the ashes, Jackie is able to retrospectively restore her brother's identity (Davies, 2002, p. 141).

A final destination?

We have seen that cremated remains have social lives of their own, embedded in material practices and entangled in social relationships (Hallam, 2010). They evoke dynamical bonds between the living and the dead. Becoming dead takes time, and the cremated remains allow the bereaved to ritualize the sequential separations from the deceased (Laqueur, 2015; Miller & Parrot, 2009). One of the interviewees described a pendant that was made of her mother's ashes. She wore the necklace for months:

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. ... When I really want to be close to her, I have the necklace. That is really something of my mom. Literally, I can wear her ashes. But for now she is standing there [on the cabinet]. (Marja, 50)

This raises the question whether a final destination for the cremated remains can truly be found. By taking

off the necklace Marja creates a reversible distance between her and her mother. As such, the material qualities of cremated remains allow for an open-ended process of ritualization (Seremetakis, 1991, p.2). Incorporated in portable ash objects, the dead can be relocated through space. Scattered, they acquire the freedom of space. Therefore, people's responses to cremated remains are not only ambiguous in the initial encounters: The ashes continue to have the power to grant the deceased an alternative social life, influencing people's attitudes and evoking a sense of the presence or absence of the deceased.

Conclusion

This article has drawn attention to the diverse attitudes and experiences of Dutch bereaved in relation to cremated remains. The survey results showed that people's attitudes toward human ashes are less straightforward than is often assumed. In particular, questions were raised by the slightly negative evaluation of cremated remains among the religiously unaffiliated respondents. Bivariate analyses illustrated that respondents who choose a cremation because of the possibilities surrounding ash disposal evaluate the cremated remains as more important, as something special or sacred, and as a means to continue bonds with the dead. Furthermore, we have seen that human ashes are more highly valued by people who have witnessed the actual cremation. Of our respondents, 14% had witnessed the placement of the coffin in the cremation chamber. Further research can improve our understanding of the increasing possibilities in crematoria in the Netherlands.

In addition, we have drawn attention to the forms of ash disposal. Scattering the remains and creating ash objects were the two most common forms of disposal, and one third of our respondents planned to dispose of the ashes in more than one way. Bivariate analyses showed that people who choose forms of ash disposal through which the deceased is kept close ascribe higher value to the cremated remains. People who scatter the remains ascribe lower value to the ashes. Elaborating on this, from our qualitative material, we demonstrated that low appreciation of the cremated remains does not equal meaningfulness. Rather, it suggests that different qualities of the ashes are emphasized. Whereas for some bereaved the dead matter was important as an object that allows for continued attachment, for others the qualities of freedom and portability were more meaningful. Rather than the dead matter itself, the means to create valuable places for the deceased was significant.

Our qualitative illustrations showed that the reality of being confronted with cremated remains can be different than anticipated. Human ashes are embedded in material practices and entangled in social relationships, evoking a discourse of care among the bereaved. Since both the temporal as well as the final destination of human ashes are important to people, the cremated remains become an object of solicitude that evokes moral obligations. Our illustrations showed that this is not without challenges. A proper form, place, and time to dispose of the ashes has to be found. Here a fundamental role is played by distance and proximity, through which the bereaved can negotiate the absence-presence of the deceased. Furthermore, as the materiality of ashes allows for an open-ended process of ritualization, the question has been raised whether a final destination can truly be found. In sum, we have seen that, although many people experience intense and physical relationships with the remains, finding a good way to deal with the ashes of one's loved one is no easy matter.

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