



DEAGENCY INTERNATIONAL  
INTERDISCIPLINARY  
CONFERENCE II.

**The Agency of the  
Dead in the Lives of  
Individuals:  
Reasons, Triggers,  
and Contexts**

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**Book of Abstracts**



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CENTER MORTALIS

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Image on the first page: Replica of Dance of Death fresco from the Church of the Holy Trinity in Hrastovlje (oil on canvas, created by John from Kastvo, 1490) in the National Gallery, Ljubljana (photographed by Vladimir Makuc, 1959).

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## **THE AGENCY OF THE DEAD IN THE LIVES OF INDIVIDUALS: REASONS, TRIGGERS, AND CONTEXTS**

Contrary to pre-modern European societies, and many contemporary non-Western societies, where the dead were considered members of the community and continued to be significantly involved in people's everyday lives, the dominant Western ontology nowadays does not integrate communication and exchange between the living and the dead. However, as a bulk of quantitative as well as qualitative research testify, for people in many contemporary Western societies, social interactions do not necessarily cease after death but are merely transformed. The dead continue to be involved in our lives, affecting our thoughts, emotions, values, behaviour, and social relations. While scholars have often treated the accounts of the agency of the dead as expressions of “folk belief”, and ghosts as symbols and metaphors of larger cultural and social problems and changes, our aim is to take the effects of the agency of the dead in the lives of individuals seriously, as people themselves experience them.

The aim of this conference is to gain an insight into the situations in which the agency of the dead manifests itself and the presence of the dead is experienced. What are the reasons, the triggers and the contexts in which the dead affect the living? The violation of social norms of behaviour and cultural and religious values is generally seen in traditional cultures as a typical reason for the manifestation of the agency of the dead. Temporal contexts traditionally regarded as triggers for unwanted interaction with the dead as ghosts, were usually critical, liminal periods in the daily, annual and life cycle. The same applies to the spatial context: boundary sites within the social construction of space, but also places associated with death (where people died or were buried), buildings with particular physical features and history, as well as places associated with mourning and the commemoration of the dead, were typical locations where the encounters with the dead were expected and where the agency of the dead was invoked. But do such “traditional” reasons and contexts still have meaning for people today? Or have new reasons and triggers emerged for the dead to affect the living? And how have new platforms for post-mortem communication - such as social media and the digital space - influenced the interactions between the living and the dead?



# PROGRAMME

## WEDNESDAY, JULY 2

Lecture Room 34

9:15-09:45     **REGISTRATION**  
10:15-10:30   **WELCOME SPEECHES**

**Prof. Dr. Mojca Schlamberger Brezar**, Dean of the Faculty of Arts,  
University of Ljubljana

**Assist. Prof. Dr. Boštjan Kravanja**, Head of the Department of  
Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of  
Ljubljana

**Prof. Dr. Mirjam Mencej**, Chair of the Programme Committee,  
Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts,  
University of Ljubljana

10:30-11:30   **PLENARY TALK**  
**Terry Gunnell**: The Revenge of the Rejected: The Rise, Fall and  
Background Context of Icelandic Beliefs in Family Ghosts

11:30-12:00   *COFFEE BREAK*

### **PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES IN VERNACULAR RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORK I.**

**Chair: Kirsten Marie Raahauge**

12:00-12:30   Ülo Valk: Personal Experience Stories of the Supernatural and the  
Agency of the Dead: Perspectives of Estonian Students  
12:30-13:00   Tina Ivnik: The Afterlife as Context: Spiritual People Experiencing the  
Agency of the Dead  
13:00-13:30   Vito Carrassi: Encountering the Dead in the Southern Italian Folklore  
  
13:30-14:30   *ORGANISED LUNCH – CATERING*

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES IN VERNACULAR  
RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORK II.**

**Chair: Ülo Valk**

- 14:30-15:00 Radvilė Racėnaitė: The Living and the Dead During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Lithuania: The Otherworldly Signs of Disrupted Traditions
- 15:00-15:30 Erika De Vivo: Of Eahpáračcat and "Stolen" Ancestors: Restless Dead in Contemporary Sápmi
- 15:30-16:00 Yseult de Blécourt: Ghosts of the Past
- 16:00-16:30 Jūratė Šlekonytė: Butterfly from the Wreath of Sorrow: A Case Study
- 16:30-17:00 *COFFEE BREAK*

**DREAMSCAPES**

**Chair: Ágnes Hesz**

- 17:00-17:30 Kaarina Koski: Problematic Relationship, Nightmares After Death
- 17:30-18:00 Lina Būgienė: Agency of the Dead in Dream Narratives

**THURSDAY, JULY 3**

Lecture Room 34

- 9:00-10:00 **PLENARY TALK**  
**Francisco José Ferrándiz:** Cuelgamuros: The Decline of a Dictatorial Funerary Project

**MASS GRAVES: SPACE OF COLLECTIVE GRIEF & MEMORY**

**Chair: Francisco José Ferrándiz**

- 10:00-10:30 Jaka Repič: Unearthing Memory: Agency of Place and Material Remains in Mass Grave Exhumations and Commemorations
- 10:30-11:00 Petra Hamer: Martyrs, Memory, and Agency: The Social Afterlife of Innocent Victims in the Bosnian War
- 11:00-11:30 *COFFEE BREAK*

## **VIOLENCE & PERSONAL GRIEF AND MEMORY I.**

**Chair: Jaka Repič**

- 11:30-12:00 Charles Oscar Warner III: The Dead Murmur as the Living Maneuver: Reflections on Post-war Men, Memories, and Machinations Encountered in the Wake(s) of Yugoslavia
- 12:00-12:30 Yordanka Dimcheva: Beyond Severing Bonds: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of Traumatic Bereavement Following Terrorism
- 12:30-13:00 Lisa McLean: "It's Like Every Day is That Same Day": Narrating Ambiguous Loss Through Photography in the Wake of Disappearance
- 13:00-15:00 *LUNCH BREAK*

## **MATERIALITY AND THE DEAD**

**Chair: Felicity Wood**

- 15:00-15:30 Nihad Dostović: Immortalizing Self – Ordinary People Endowing Money "For Own Soul" in Mid-17th Century Bosnia
- 15:30-16:00 Manolis G. Varvounis and Nadia Macha-Bizoumi: Funeral Homes: The Urban Management of Death Rituals
- 16:00-16:30 *COFFEE BREAK*

## **SPACES FOR THE DEAD: FROM COLLECTIVE TO PRIVATE PLACES**

**Chair: Kaarina Koski**

- 16:30-17:00 Mirjam Mencej: "The Dead Have Given Up on Us." Space, the Dead and Morality in Contemporary Rural Muslim Bosnia
- 17:00-17:30 Simona Kuntarič Zupanc: Place-making by the Dead: Cemeteries and the Agency of the Dead
- 17:30-18:00 Kirsten Marie Raahauge: Invisible Worlds: Haunting Between Sensation and Representation

## FRIDAY, JULY 4

	Lecture Room 18 <b>PARALLEL SESSION A:            CONTEMPORARY            COMMUNICATION PRACTICES            WITH THE DEAD:            NEW TECHNOLOGIES</b> <b>Chair: Emese Ilyefalvi</b>	Lecture Room 119 <b>PARALLEL SESSION B:            COMMUNICATION WITH THE            DEAD: FUNERARY RITUALS</b> <b>Chair: Tatiana Bužeková</b>
9:00- 9:30	Johanna Maaria Sumiala: Deathbots: A Media Anthropological Analysis of the Social Lives of the Dead in Synthetic Media	Danijela Jerotijević: Representations of Death and Cooperation in the Context of Funeral Rituals in Eastern Serbia
9:30-10:00	Lauren Grace Fadiman: Haunted Handhelds: Science and Spirituality in Cellular Encounters with the Dead	Jennifer Amy Riley: "I Never Said Any of This Made Sense": Grave Goods as Indicators of Complex Post-death Agency in the Contemporary UK Context
10:00-10:30	Aljaž Mesner: New Ways of Being Haunted: The Evolving Agency of Yūrei in Contemporary Japan	Asli Zengin: Sensorial Registers of Mourning and Care Work for the Dead in Turkey
10:30-11:00	<i>COFFEE BREAK</i>  <b>INTERACTIONS WITH THE            DEAD IN THE CONTEXT OF            NEW SPIRITUALITIES</b> <b>Chair: Tina Ivnik</b>	<b>COMMUNICATION WITH THE            DEAD: COMMEMORATIVE            RITUALS</b> <b>Chair: Terry Gunnell</b>
11:00-11:30	Tatiana Bužeková: Lines of Descent and Altered States of Consciousness: Experiencing the Agency of the Dead Through Spiritual Energy	Michal Uhrin: Religious Holidays and Ceremonies as Points of Remembrance of the Dead in Time and Space: The Case of All Saints Days in Slovakia
11:30-12:00	Tomaž Simetinger: Painting as Communication with the Dead and Other Non-human Beings	Evy Johanne Håland: Greek Women's Foodways in Connection with Death Rituals
12:00-12:30	Emese Ilyefalvi: Visiting Seers and Mediums in Contemporary Hungary: Contexts and Triggers	Alena Leshkevich: Veneration of the Dead in Belarusian Traditional Culture
12:30-14:30	<i>LUNCH BREAK</i>	

**CONNECTIONS THROUGH  
PROPERTIES OF THE DEAD**  
**Chair: Johanna Maaria  
Sumiala**

**COMMUNICATION WITH THE  
DEAD: ASKING FOR ASSISTANCE**  
**Chair: Michal Uhrin**

14:30-15:00	Ágnes Hesz: The Dead and Their Property: The Role Belongings of the Dead Play in the Relationship Between the Living and Dead	Michelangelo Giampaoli: Crosses, Candles, Cigars and Graves: The Dead at Work for the (R)existence of the Living
15:00-15:30	Jonathan Laszlo Mark: Heart Caths and Holy Water: Vernacular Religion and Grief After Organ Transplant	Florența Popescu-Simion: Those Dead Who Are Telling Us What to Do – On the Dynamics of a Vernacular Ritual Centred Around Some “Miraculous” Graves in a Romanian Cemetery
15:30-16:00	<b>VIOLENCE &amp; PERSONAL GRIEF AND MEMORY II.</b> <b>Chair: Petra Hamer</b>  Caitlin R. Kight and Marie Anne Clancy: Creative Remembrance: A Digital Exhibition of Personal and Professional Grief	Veenat Arora: Connecting with the Dead: Rituals from South India and the Himalayas
16:00-16:30	Felicity Wood: Murder Trials and the Dead: Absence, Prescence and Agency	
16:30-17:00	<b>Closing Remarks</b>	
17:30	<i>ORGANISED DINNER</i>	

**SATURDAY,  
JULY 5**

10:00	Guided Tour of Žale Cemetery
15:00	Guided Tour of Ljubljana



## ABSTRACTS

**Arora, Veenat**

***Connecting with the Dead: Rituals from South India and the Himalayas***

In Hinduism, life and death are not seen as opposites, but in continuity to one another. Both of them are interconnected stages of existence. Death is viewed as a transition, marking the separation of the subtle essence, the soul or spirit from the physical body. While the physical body ceases to exist, the atman (soul/spirit) continues to exist. The existence of the soul is both acknowledged and celebrated through various rituals. It is believed that the spirit of the deceased reaches the pitrilok (realm of ancestors), which is as sacred as devlok (realm of deities). Consequently, rituals are prescribed from the moment of death to maintain connections with the deceased. Within the larger canopy of Hinduism, numerous cults and traditions emphasise ongoing interaction with ancestors, seeking their participation in mundane life activities. Drawing on sacred texts and ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines folk practices such as puvataikkari, Buta Kola in South India, and the worship of Devi/Devta (ancestral deities) in the Himalayan region. In these traditions, the deceased are invited and communicated with through mediums. Their involvement is sought for protection from evil, gratitude is expressed through dance performances, and their consent is requested for important life decisions such as weddings, land purchases, and other significant matters.

**Bužeková, Tatiana**

***Lines of Descent and Altered States of Consciousness: Experiencing the Agency of the Dead Through Spiritual Energy\****

The paper addresses accounts of experiences with the dead provided by people from Slovakia engaged in spiritual practices that represent an alternative to Christianity as a dominant religion in this country. I will present the results of ethnographic research carried out in Bratislava, its capital. In the analysis of practitioners' narratives, I will focus on the notion of spiritual energy that is characteristic of alternative spiritual currents. I argue that people who adapted spiritual views experience the agency of the dead through this concept, as in the spiritual milieu the universal energy is understood as underlying people's actions and uniting the living and the dead in one community. Accounts of such experiences could be divided into two categories: (1) contact with the dead in altered states of consciousness and (2) inherited qualities, usually labelled as lines of descent. In both cases, the agency of the dead has a significant moral aspect. In interpretation of people's ideas, I will use the theoretical concept of psychological essentialism referring to the tendency to represent objects in terms of a deeper, unobservable property that determines their observable characteristics. As recent research has shown that psychological essentialism influences moral judgement, I will also apply the notion of value-based essentialism meaning that people think of certain social groups in terms of an underlying essence that is understood as a value. This tendency can explain the impact of the notion of spiritual energy on practitioners' moral behaviour: (1) the interaction between the living and the dead implies reciprocal help; and (2) the living are supposed to behave morally in the sense of promoting positive inherited traits and breaking the inheritance of negative traits.

**de Blécourt, Yseult**  
***Ghosts of the Past***

My presentation will discuss a number of narrative texts about ghosts. These are Dutch narrative texts, mainly (but not completely) collected in the province of Groningen. There will be three quite different sections, all three somehow connected to Groningen. The first one will be about Rosalinde. Her narrative was an invented ghost narrative; it is very unlikely that it ever circulated in oral tradition, although it certainly circulated, before and after WWII. I will discuss whether or not these are different contexts in regard of the narrators. One can say that its original publication, in as folkloristic journal, was caused (or “triggered”) by the wish to come up with a realistic Dutch narrative (although the inventor borrowed elements from Shakespeare). The second, main section will be about an article by Dr. Tjaard W. R. de Haan, who I call my benevolent ghost as he put me on the track of folklore (and especially narrative folklore). Tjaard's mother came from Groningen and he spent some of his formative years there, especially when studying there and a few years later when escaping the German Arbeitseinsatz (labour deployment), both during WWII. His article discussed all the then available versions (also those not from Groningen) of the shroud that was too short. A long shroud should make the dead stumble when approaching Jezus. Thus the ghosts were complaining (moaning) that their shrouds were too long. Apart from the versions in Tjaard's article I will point at previous versions by him (but not in the article) and one or two later versions (again from Groningen) that were collected by “fieldworkers” from what is now called the Meertens Institute. The third section is a kind of dessert: containing an illustrated narrative, written by Marten Toonder (whose father originated from Groningen). It is about a wizard (Hocus [P.] Pas), who produced a ghost that made people have uncanny experiences. During WWII Marten (and his studio) manufactured illegal papers.

**Būgienė, Lina**  
***Agency of the Dead in Dream Narratives***

Dream narratives in general can be regarded as a certain meta-language, turning the specific individual oneiric experience into a socially acceptable public performance. As folklore fieldwork data inevitably testifies, the dead hold an especially prominent place in dream narratives – both in the traditional and the modern society. Firstly, the dead seem to exercise an exclusive power to initiate dream communication, since they decide who and when will dream of them (the living sometimes even complain of being unable to make dead loved ones to appear in their dreams). Secondly, the aim of the dead when appearing in dreams, is to induce the living to take certain actions (thus it is agency par excellence). These actions can be directed either at the living, when they are warned of some mishaps or difficulties awaiting them and instructed of how to avoid those, or at the dead – in order to fulfil their requests facilitating their situation, e.g. to offer prayers, to buy mass, or to pay off their remaining debts, etc. Anyway, the demands of the dead conveyed in dreams seem to be endowed with special urgency, while attempts of the living to disregard them are, as a rule, perceived as unwise or even immoral. The agency of the dead, as conveyed by dream narratives, seems to be so frequently exercised that it becomes almost universal and does not lose its relevance even in the modern era, turning these narratives, as a genre, into a very vivid and persistent folklore form.

**Carrassi, Vito**

***Encountering the Dead in the Southern Italian Folklore***

Dead who come back from the afterlife and individuals who encounter or (believe to) see spirits, ghosts, revenants are a very common subject of beliefs, memorates and legends in Southern Italy. As already pointed out in my previous paper presented at Deagency 2024, the dead and their connection with earthly life and the living is a ubiquitous and fundamental feature in the Southern Italian culture and religion. This is, indeed, a key concept in the thought and work of the Neapolitan ethnologist Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965), whose seminal books, "Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico" (1958) and "Sud e magia" (1959), have death, and the resulting "crisis of presence", as a cornerstone of his ethnological and historical investigation. As a consequence, reasons and triggers for the dead to affect the living can be found in his works, as well as the temporal and spatial contexts in which the encounters between the living and the dead were likely to occur. Starting from some stories directly collected by de Martino during his fieldwork in Lucania, in my paper I will try to provide an overview and a discussion of the most common and significant topics, features and meanings characterising the Southern Italian folk narrative tradition concerning the interaction between the living and the dead. A comparative analysis will be supplied through the earlier material collected in Sicily by Giuseppe Pitre (1841-1916), who devoted a chapter of his "Usi e costumi, credenze e pregiudizi del popolo siciliano" (1889) to some categories of dead who were likely to be turned into ghosts and revenants, such as beheaded and violently or suddenly died individuals. Eventually, the current vitality of such beliefs and stories will be briefly examined, in order to evaluate continuity and evolution in the Southern Italian folklore.

**De Vivo, Erika**

***Of Eahpáračat and "Stolen" Ancestors: Restless Dead in Contemporary Sápmi***

Since time immemorial, the Sámi people have dwelt in their ancestral homeland of Sápmi, (a geo-cultural area covering northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and easternmost Russia). According to Sámi worldviews, humans share this land with numerous other-than-human entities. With the establishment of nation-states, the Sámi were subjected to socio-political and epistemological colonization often implemented through coercion and violence. Nevertheless, Indigenous worldviews were not completely erased but blended with Christian epistemologies. Among the resulting locally-specific cultural values, one can include the interaction between the living and the dead. Such occurrence is not exceptional and can happen under various circumstances. Upon encountering such entities, the living must act "appropriately" according to specific cultural norms. Stories passed down through generations preserve memories of these interactions, guiding behavior towards non-living entities, while their presence is enshrined in many placenames.

This fieldwork-based paper examines some stories of Eahpáraš – the "ghost" of an exposed newborn left to die without a proper burial – addressing how toponyms represent tools of permanence, fixing in the collective memory the presence of non-human entities and ancestors. Placenames allow the remembrance and incorporation of the dead in the community of the living through a relationship regulated by respect and reciprocity. My analysis tackles the complex relationships between the living and dead among the Sami who are facing renewed colonial pressures while struggling for recognition of Indigenous

rights. These reflections provide the impetus to consider contemporary issues that intertwine the past and the future, such as the status and fate of Sámi remains—stolen from graves by European researchers in the 19th century to prove Sami biological inferiority—and currently held in museums across Europe. Although some remains have been returned, many are still held in museums, a condition that makes them new “restless dead” removed from their descendants and from their desecrated burials.

**Dimcheva, Yordanka**

***Beyond Severing Bonds: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of Traumatic Bereavement Following Terrorism***

The “severing bonds” model of grief based on Freud’s (1917) “Mourning and Melancholia” emphasises that for grief to proceed in a healthy manner the bereaved individuals need to undertake efforts to gradually relinquish the intense attachment to the loved lost one and seek closure. Drawing on in-depth phenomenological interviews with seven bereaved parents who lost a child to the terrorist attacks in Paris (13 November 2015) and Nice (14 July 2016), this paper takes a different approach by exploring the world-relearning potential of grief and the role that the sustained relationship with the deceased play for the ongoing lives of the bereaved. The paper looks at how the in-felt presence of the deceased child is preserved through inner dialogue, rituals, and signs and that these affective experiences play an accommodating role in the reality of traumatic loss. Drawing on Klass, Silverman and Nickman’s (1996) insight into the role of “continuing bonds” in the grief process and Allen and Brown’s (2011) concept of a “living memorial” - a practice that enacts commemoration through affective labour, the paper argues that the social being of the deceased does not necessarily come to an end with death, but could in fact be extended through affective labour and care. It also demonstrates how by continuously reflecting on the traumatic experience through a wide range of “commitments in grief” (Ingerslev 2021), the parents strive to reconstruct their sense of self, violated by the watershed event, and to “build” from the relationship with the deceased in a manner that prologues their child’s affective life. Simultaneously, such practices sustain the presence of the deceased in the lives of the living and prologue their agency in some unique way which surpasses the ordinary connotations of shared time and space.

**Dostović, Nihad**

***Immortalizing Self – Ordinary People Endowing Money “For Own Soul” in Mid-17th Century Bosnia***

In this paper my aim is to show how ordinary people from rural areas of north-eastern Bosnia tried to create memories of their lives through endowing money and establishing small pious endowment (waqf /vakuf). The source of the study are two separate archival documents from 1640s. According to these documents, two individuals from rural areas (Rahić – today near Brčko, and Treštenica – today near Banovići) endowed money so that someone could recite chapters from Qur’an for their souls. In the first document, testator endows money so that his daughters recite chapter al-Ikhlās from Qur’an each morning three times, and after them their children, and further children of their children. In the second document, the testator endows money to the mosque in neighboring village with condition that chapter al-Ikhlās is recited for his own souls each Friday night three times. In this study my aim is to understand how people in the region of north-eastern Bosnia conceptualized and perceived death? Was it a literal practice of a theory derived from

religious teaching? To explore this, I plan to include various other sources such as narrative accounts from Bašeskija, I. Frano Jukić, etc. Additionally, I aim to observe whether the practice of endowing money for the sake of self-immortalizing has continued into modern age and if it has taken on new forms. In this regard, I will also investigate if certain pious practices like hajr-česma/voda (benevolent public fountain /tap water) can be related to the concept of self-immortalization? The source of the two documents is Ottoman court daily registry of Tuzla dated 1643-1646 CE. The daily registries of Ottoman (sharia) courts are known as sijjils / sidjils and most of their content was written in official Ottoman-Turkish. These protocolary books contain various legal documents such as sultanic orders, circulatory letters, personal disputes, testaments, etc.

**Fadiman, Lauren Grace**

***Haunted Handhelds: Science and Spirituality in Cellular Encounters with the Dead***

“Cursed” phone lines, like the serial killer-summoning (458) 666-4355, supposedly harbor threats strong enough to exit the cellular lacuna and enact terror in the “real” world. But that is also the essential pleasure of the telephone: that it corporealizes. Since the earliest expressions of wonder at the telephonic—namely, at the uncanny sense that someone is right in the room with you, regardless of their distance—the phone line has constituted a space wherein the real and unreal clash in unnerving ways. Some of the most extreme attestations to the corporealization enacted by the telephone may come in the form of “haunted” phone calls. These phone calls, in folk imagination, connect callers to dead loved ones, briefly making them real once more in the home—and, in folk imagination, evidencing the sphere of the afterlife. The visceral nature of the encounters can even be liberating to those who have them, allowing them to subsequently make changes to their “real” lives. Explanations for haunted phone calls draw on a variety of epistemic frameworks, including a kind of causal thinking with clear links to modern scientific descriptive practice. In this paper, I argue that through these attestations to supernatural experience, we encounter the following popular imaginary: the belief that telephonic technology allows the dead to meaningfully bridge the lacuna between “here” and “there” and influence the world of the living, whether by communicating messages that allow their loved ones to “move on” or by causing mischief, malice, and inconvenience. The hyper-modernity represented by the cell phone has thus not hindered popular belief in the supernatural so much as created a new channel for its expression, both in form and content.

**Ferrándiz, Francisco José**

***Cuelgamuros: The Decline of a Dictatorial Funerary Project***

In this talk, I will discuss recent developments in the “resignification” of the Valley of Cuelgamuros (formerly known as Valley of the Fallen or Valle de los Caídos), a surprisingly unresolved Francoist monument in Spain. It is based on a 25-year-long multisite ethnography covering numerous mass grave exhumations containing Republican civilians executed during and after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), as well as on following the unfolding afterlives of the exhumed bodies in forensic laboratories, in the media, in “dignifying” political rituals, reburials, DNA sampling rituals, demonstrations, book presentations, academic conferences and debates, social networks, and art exhibitions. Over time, my research project branched out to incorporate the analysis of the memorial conflicts that have arisen around the Valley of Cuelgamuros. For sixteen years after its

inauguration in 1959, the burial arrangement in the Valley, key to its overall meaning and memorial power, was presided over by José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of Spain's Mussolini-influenced Fascist party, Falange. In 1975, Francisco Franco was buried in a symmetrical position on the other side of the main altar. Under the guise of a "reconciliatory monument", the valley became the main memorial site for Spanish fascists. Surrounding these two politically charged corpses is a vast underground necropolis containing nearly 34,000 bodies from the Civil War, brought from all over the country between 1959 and 1983. The discovery in early 21st century that Republican mass graves had been moved to the memorial without the knowledge or permission of their relatives put a strain on the memorial. After a brief introduction to the complex making of the monument and its multiple frictions with emerging cultures of memory in twenty-first-century Spain, my presentation will focus on the tortuous "undoing" of its necropolitical layout. This funerary unmaking is part of a refashioning of the monument in the context of what is currently called "democratic memory" in Spain.

**Giampaoli, Michelangelo**

***Crosses, Candles, Cigars and Graves: The Dead at Work for the (R)existence of the Living***

Individuals born in urban peripheries perceive the periphery as their center. The spaces and resources found in these urban margins, particularly the unofficial ones, play a crucial role in shaping citizenship, rights, and health in its various manifestations. Whether located on the margins – both real and symbolic – of major cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro or in smaller towns, many cemeteries are visited daily by people whose relationship with death is not solely characterized by fear and loss. Instead, these individuals believe that the dead can assist in addressing a wide array of everyday challenges, from illness and addiction to broader structural vulnerabilities faced by their communities. Through ethnographic research carried out in several cemeteries across Brazil, we aim to explore their significance as vital sites for diverse unofficial religious practices rooted in the belief that the dead can be contacted and, most importantly, can help the living. Cemeteries such as São João Batista in Rio de Janeiro and Consolação in São Paulo, along with lesser-known cemeteries in the cities of Araraquara and Ribeirão Preto, serve as unofficial yet impactful spaces where Folk Catholicism, Spiritism, and Afro-Brazilian religions engage with the dead for the benefit of the living. The tombs of spiritist mediums continue to channel positive energies, while the deities of Candomblé and Umbanda perform their customary roles: bringing hope and solutions to those who have little (or nothing) to rely on in the fragile urban margins where they live. At the same time, without awaiting the official canonization from the Catholic Church in Rome, thousands of people have already recognized that there are many "saints" in Brazil: once children, young girls, or homeless individuals, these souls are believed to work miracles. Their "church" is the cemetery; the "altars" where they can be prayed are their tombs.



**Gunnell, Terry**

***The Revenge of the Rejected: The Rise, Fall and Background Context of Icelandic Beliefs in Family Ghosts***

Buildings in Iceland in the past tended to have a limited lifespan, something that resulted in the fact that beliefs in ghosts or spirits associated with buildings used to also be limited. Instead of such beliefs, Iceland has numerous legends about spirits that attach themselves to particular families, causing a wide range of problems over a number of generations. Interestingly enough, such beliefs do not seem to be encountered in neighbouring countries. This lecture will present an overview of the legends concerning these spirits, commonly referred to as *mórar* (peat-reds: male) and *skottar* (tassled hats: female), which commonly have a background in the mistreatment of the poor by the more wealthy. Attention will be paid to their features, their distribution, the potential reasons for their apparent uniqueness, and why these beliefs seem to be dwindling (but not totally disappearing) in modern Icelandic society.

**Håland, Evy Johanne**

***Greek Women's Foodways in Connection with Death Rituals***

Women's memorial services for the dead and their accompanying gifts are important within Greek death rituals, and it is crucial to include women's perspectives to understand rituals. Accordingly, attention must be paid to the meals and food offerings at the tombs and their ingredients—the importance of commemorative ceremonies after the burial involving gifts. These rituals mirror rituals dedicated to saints. In Greece the religious rituals are principally performed to ensure the food supply. Since the dead control the fertility, the death cult is a central feature in festivals. It is important to be on good terms with the dead, because they influence the living and the stronger powers that control the fruits of the earth. Since women are responsible for the food, paralleling Mother Earth, they are the main performers of the rituals dedicated to the dead to ensure the food. Based on Greek women's values, their understanding of their roles may be called a poetics of womanhood, the point of which is to show how to be good at being a woman, for example, when performing death rituals. Every Saturday morning women demonstrate their poetics of womanhood by their cleaning-abilities when washing their tombs at the cemetery, before they arrange food-offerings, thus maintaining the social relations with their dead. In addition to the memorial services performed within the family sphere, annual collective festivals are dedicated to the dead. These are the "Soul Saturdays", when women bring food to the cemetery. After the blessing by the priest, it is eaten, so the souls of the dead may be forgiven. Based on first-hand field work carried out by the author since the 1980s, the paper examines these rituals dedicated to deceased persons in which women's offerings of food and other gifts at tombs are central for the preservation of the community.

**Hamer, Petra**

***Martyrs, Memory, and Agency: The Social Afterlife of Innocent Victims in the Bosnian War\****

In Bosnian-Herzegovinian Islamic tradition, those whose lives have been violently ended are called šehidi, martyrs. In the Quran, it is written that šehidi go straight to džennet, heaven, and can recommend 77 members of their family to Almighty Allah, who will grant them a better afterlife.

During the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995), about 100.000 people lost their lives. Many of them are now buried in šehidska mezarja, martyrs' cemeteries, neatly organised places of final rest where family members (as well as others) can pay their respects by praying for them. These cemeteries are sites of memory and collective identity, reinforcing the idea that the dead continue to participate in social life. There are two types of šehidska mezarja: in some, Muslim soldiers of the Armija Bosne i Hercegovine, Army of Bosnia-Herzegovina are buried, while in others, innocent victims of ethnic cleansing, are laid to rest.

In this paper, I argue that the agency of the dead is visible in the necessity of the living to pray for and commemorate them in order to receive their assistance or recommendation before God in the afterlife. Fieldwork results from a small municipality in north-western Bosnia-Herzegovina show that people feel obligated to attend yearly commemorations and pray for šehidi in order to gain their “assistance with God,” as one interviewee expressed. I argue that the dead influence the lives of the living, their rituals and behaviours, and are incorporated into everyday activities, politics, and, of course, religion. It is debatable whether this relationship is reciprocal, as my interviewees claim: “Šehidi do not need anything from us; we need them to help us with our afterlife.” This tension reflects broader anthropological debates on the ontology of the dead, where the deceased are seen as both absent and present, inert yet socially active, reinforcing the fluid boundaries between life and death.

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**Hesz, Ágnes**

***The Dead and Their Property: The Role Belongings of the Dead Play in the Relationship Between the Living and Dead\****

In most cultures, properties of the dead – from everyday objects to their houses or land – are subject to special treatment: they are destroyed, temporarily forbidden to be used, or they are ritually separated from their dead owner before being passed down to heirs. Yet with some belongings, ties are not completely severed; the dead would keep appearing in the rooms or houses they owned, and they would impact the lives of those who are using their belongings. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among Hungarian Catholics in rural Romania and Hungary, this paper looks into the nature of the bond between the dead and their properties. Focusing on the concept of ownership and debt, it aims to understand the role various properties of the dead play in shaping the relationship between the living and the dead in different social contexts.

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**Ilyefalvi, Emese**

***Visiting Seers and Mediums in Contemporary Hungary: Contexts and Triggers\****

What are the different contexts and triggers that encourage people to communicate with their deceased relatives through a medium? How do they select from an incredibly wide and diverse range of practitioners? In this paper, I examine the current reasons and social contexts of visiting seers and mediums in Hungary today. The mediums I have studied range from public figures – celebrities who appear on TV and radio, maintain active social media profiles, go on national tours, and hold both small- and large-group séances – to others who remain almost entirely unknown, advertise minimally, and offer only face-to-face or online consultations. Why do people visit them? In my ethnographic interviews, I encountered traditional “classic” motives known from 20th-century folklore and fieldwork – such as unclear circumstances of death, uncertainty about the afterlife, or suicide but new motives have also appeared. Earlier data suggests that people typically visited mediums for a one-time consultation to resolve a specific issue or ask a concrete question. In contrast, I have found an increasing number of clients who approach the mediumship encounter as an ongoing, therapeutic relationship. These clients often return repeatedly, sometimes without a specific question, simply to maintain contact with the deceased. A notable shift in the 21st century is the commercialization of this practice: most mediums now charge for their services, and due to the relatively high cost, such sessions are often given as anniversary gifts – commemorating a death, birthday, or marriage – within families. In my presentation, I analyse these evolving practices based on ethnographic interviews and the study of client posts and comments on social media.

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**Ivnik, Tina**

***The Afterlife as Context: Spiritual People Experiencing the Agency of the Dead\****

Researchers have noted that a growing number of people in the West believe in reincarnation. These statistics indicate a significant shift, given that such beliefs were nearly non-existent there two centuries ago (Hammer 2003: 455). This trend can be partially explained by the spread and increasing influence of alternative spirituality. However, it is not reincarnation *per se* that characterises this change, but a particular understanding of it – different from Buddhist or Hinduist conceptions – that is typical for alternative spiritual beliefs (Hanegraaff 2009: 267–268). In the presentation, I will explore specific notions of reincarnation that are present among alternative spiritual adherents in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I will be interested in how those conceptions shape an individuals’ experience of the agency of the dead. I will argue that the predominantly positive visions of the afterlife that are widespread among my interlocutors influenced how they experienced the agency of the personally significant deceased. My analysis will be based on six-months of fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews with alternative spiritual adherents in two largest cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Sarajevo and Banja Luka.

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**Jerotijević, Danijela**

***Representations of Death and Cooperation in the Context of Funeral Rituals in Eastern Serbia***

The presentation is based on ethnographic research in eastern Serbia. It is a region inhabited by Serbs and Wallachians. The local population has extremely complex ideas about the afterlife and funeral rituals. It is a population belonging to the Orthodox faith, but their attitudes towards death represent a syncretic set of ideas that go beyond the Orthodox framework. In this presentation I will focus on an analysis of the reasons behind this syncretism. In addition to beliefs, I will analyze the rituals performed in the context of the procession of the dead and highlight their role in fostering cooperation in the community.

**Kight, Caitlin R. and Marie Anne Clancy**

***Creative Remembrance: A Digital Exhibition of Personal and Professional Grief***

Creative Remembrance as an international digital art exhibition \* launched in September 2024. It currently features 37 pieces contributed by lay artists who, collectively, used a variety of techniques and mediums to express their feelings about palliative care and dying. The exhibition is part of the larger Creative Toolkit initiative \*\*, through which a collaborative team of university researchers, clinical practitioners, educators, and other community members co-develop creative arts-based approaches to support the mental health and wellbeing of frontline staff. Of particular interest is alleviating, or altogether preventing, unresolved personal and professional grief, which can have detrimental effects at both the individual (e.g., depression, sleeplessness, anxiety, guilt, burnout) and organisational (e.g., staff absenteeism, presenteeism, attrition) levels. The goal of Creative Toolkit activities more generally, and of the Creative Remembrance exhibition specifically, is to enable reflection and provide a healthy cathartic outlet for grief. In this presentation, we will present the results of a content analysis exploring the themes of the Creative Remembrance submissions – including both the artworks and their accompanying narratives (provided by each artist). Our analysis will consider the primary subjects presented in each piece; the thoughts, feelings, and actions they are meant to convey and engender; the relationships they examine; and their aesthetics. The results will help illuminate how the dead continue to be perceived by, and influence, the living, particularly amongst this population of participants who self-selected to engage with art as a means of responding to bereavement. We hope this will help us better understand how and when artistic interventions can support the grieving process – enabling us to co-create more effective interventions and perhaps even adjust our approaches to appeal to an even wider audience.

\*<https://artspaces.kunstmatrix.com/node/13464502>

\*\*<https://www.creativetoolkit.online/>

**Koski, Kaarina**

***Problematic Relationship, Nightmares after Death***

Dreams that follow bereavement are usually positive in nature. Nightmares are only assumed to follow if the death was particularly sudden or traumatic, and they typically include futile attempts to prevent the death or reenact death and suffering. These are generally seen as a way of processing the loss. Experiences about the dead visiting the bereaved via dreams are likewise usually positive. The deceased come to bid farewell, to

comfort the living, or to tell they are all right on the other side. In this paper, I will analyse three exceptional cases, in which communication with a deceased parent in dreams has evoked anxiety. My research material consists of three written bereavement narratives by adult women, archived in 2014. In each case, the relationship with the parent had been problematic. The texts depict power struggles between mother and daughter, a selfish and negligent father, and another father who bullied and suppressed his family until his death – and even beyond it. I argue that these bad dreams did not primarily process a traumatic death of these parents but were triggered by the disharmonious relationships. As noted in bereavement studies, relationships, which were problematic in life, can continue to be so in death, and the problems may need to be worked out. Each of the three women reacted differently to their dream experiences: one by simply dismissing them and waiting for them to fade, another by banishing the ghost, and the third by tenaciously imagining that the parent would gradually change in the afterlife.

**Kuntarič Zupanc, Simona**

***Placemaking by the Dead: Cemeteries and the Agency of the Dead\****

This presentation explores cemeteries as spaces where the dead remain actively present. Drawing on ethnographic material and firsthand accounts collected during ten months of fieldwork in rural northeastern Slovenia, I examine experiences of encounters with the dead and feelings of their presence in cemeteries. Moving beyond conventional understandings of cemeteries as static sites of burial and remembrance, I argue that these are dynamic spaces of ongoing relationships—shaped not only by the practices of the living but also by the agency of the dead. By framing cemeteries as contact zones between the living and the dead, I show how such encounters influence spatial perception and contribute to processes of placemaking—revealing that the dead are not absent from the landscape but are, in fact, woven into its very fabric.

\*Funded by the European Union (ERC project DEAGENCY, № 101095729)

**Leshkevich, Alena**

***Veneration of the Dead in Belarusian Traditional Culture***

According to beliefs prevalent in Belarusian traditional culture, the dead were “responsible” for the well-being of the living. Orthodox Belarusians honored them several times a year, most often on Saturdays before major holidays, with a special dinner at home or a visit to the cemetery. Such memorial Saturdays are called Dzyady (verbatim “grandfathers”). Sometimes Dzyady was preceded by Baby (verbatim “grandmothers”) on Friday, then on Dzyady, deceased men were commemorated, and on Baby, deceased women. In a separate local tradition, there could be up to 7 such memorial days per year. The proverb “If there were a seventh Dzyad, the world would end” is recorded, since a memorial dinner required considerable expenses from a peasant family. The celebration of Dzyady was considered mandatory. In the modern Republic of Belarus, Radunitsa – the second Tuesday after Easter – is a national day off. Despite the fact that this memorial day is not known in all local traditions (but usually some memorial date is known during Easter time – Easter itself, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday or the Sunday after it), visiting cemeteries on Radunitsa, even where it was not traditionally obligatory, is becoming popular. At the same time, old local memorial traditions are declining. Another reason for the decline is the general change in lifestyle, the lesser significance of traditional holidays in modern Belarusian society. Often in ethnographic expeditions, one can record stories

from women born in the 1930s and younger about how they forgot to celebrate one of the Dzyady, which were previously mandatory in their area, and on the night after this date, they dreamed of deceased relatives with reproaches. People have similar dreams when the deceased does not like how she or he has been buried or remembered on special days up to a year after their death and asks for something to be passed on to the “other” world. In this case, the “passing on” should be buried on the grave, or placed in the coffin of another deceased person in this village, or offered to a local holy place, for example, a venerated spring. The presentation will be illustrated with field ethnographic material recorded in Belarus over the past 20 years.

**Mark, Jonathan Laszlo**

***Heart Caths and Holy Water: Vernacular Religion and Grief After Organ Transplant***

What does it mean to live for two people? To be living yet always connected to death? As someone who is three decades post heart transplant, my life has been heavily shaped by my own transplant identity and by awareness of the experiences of the larger organ transplant community. Utilizing both autoethnography and interviews with two other organ transplant recipients, I sought to explore the many ways that the experience of organ transplant continues to shape us, including the “lingering” identity of the deceased organ donor within us. My paper primarily focuses on the ways in which the transplant experience shapes occurrences of vernacular religion in transplant recipients and their families, as in the cases of one recipient’s Cuban Catholicism and another’s Evangelicalism. This research also acts as a blending of the topics of transplant ghosts and transplant grief as perpetual metaphysical experiences within the post transplant experience. I draw on queer temporality from within queer theory as well as use elements of hauntology. Physically, emotionally, and potentially metaphysically, the essence of the deceased donor will always be with us. In relation to queer temporalities, to be a transplant recipient is to exist in multiple timelines. At the base level, there is the “medical time” of waiting, the fuzziness of time and memory during and after surgery, and the temporality of living both as yourself and as a continuation of another’s life. Though the true identity and consciousness of the donor may be lost, some essence of their “timeline” in life has not yet ended as long as a piece of them is kept alive in another.

**McLean, Lisa**

***“It’s Like Every Day is That Same Day”: Narrating Ambiguous Loss Through Photography in the Wake of Disappearance***

For those left behind, the disappearance of a loved one may cause a “catastrophe of meaning” (Gatti 2014) wherein the dead/disappeared exist within a liminal space between life and death. As the status of the disappeared is unknown, those grieving these losses often report feeling frozen in their grief, in their own state of liminality known as ambiguous loss (Boss 1999). Ambiguous losses are characterised by uncertainty: will the disappeared be found; are they alive or dead; will the family ever have an answer to the swirling questions surrounding the fate of their loved ones; will perpetrators be held accountable? This presentation examines the agency of the dead/disappeared as narrated by their grieving relatives through the medium of photography and personal storytelling. The presentation draws from two recent studies with relatives of disappeared persons in varied socio-political settings. The first is an ethnographic account of the grief-fuelled activism of Central American mothers of disappeared migrants. In towns and cities along



the migrant route in Mexico, collectives of mothers of disappeared migrants create public displays of the portraits of their missing relatives in an effort to locate the disappeared and protest the violence of militarised borders. The second case focuses on a photovoice study with Yazidi women refugees in Canada that utilised personal photography and storytelling to narrate their experiences of grief, loss, and survival in the aftermath of the 2014 genocide in Northern Iraq, which resulted in the forced disappearance of thousands of Yazidis at the hands of ISIS. Taken together, these two cases illustrate how photography and storytelling present a means for those grieving ambiguous loss to resist the violence of disappearance by bringing the disappeared into the public sphere, thus refusing the silence surrounding disappearance, and facilitating the agency of the dead/disappeared in making claims for justice.

**Mencej, Mirjam**

***"The Dead Have Given Up on Us." Space, the Dead and Morality in Contemporary Rural Muslim Bosnia\****

The paper explores changes in spatial and social practices in rural Bosnian Muslim communities in the context of the wider post-war economic and societal changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina that are affecting and shaping the places of rural communities, and in particular their moral charge. It argues that the dead are actively involved in this process and participate in it as agents of (changing) morality. The changed post-war spatial movement and social interactions in the community have generated new locales for the dead's agentive power, reflective of limited social ties between neighbours and the decreased significance of the neighbourhood as a social institution. These new locales, together with the change in the type of dead manifesting agency, the paper argues, mirror the increased significance of individuals' private lives and families in contemporary rural Muslim Bosnia, with private households rather than neighbourhoods becoming the main centres of sociality and moral imagination.

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**Mesner, Aljaž**

***New Ways of Being Haunted: The Evolving Agency of Yūrei in Contemporary Japan***

This paper draws on two months of fieldwork in Japan during which the author researched the evolving relationships between the Japanese and non-human entities, focusing particularly on Yūrei—figures in Japanese folklore roughly analogous to Western ghosts. It examines how interactions with Yūrei have evolved in the modern era, particularly in relation to technological advancements and their impact on ontological beliefs. The rise of digital technologies and online communities has fostered new forms of engagement with Yūrei, blurring the boundaries between the living and the dead. While belief in spirits is experiencing a resurgence globally, in Japan, the presence of Yūrei has remained constant throughout its history. From Edo-period ghost paintings and traditional storytelling to contemporary media, such as ghost photography, TV shows, and online communities, the role and agency of Yūrei continue to evolve. The author explores how these supernatural beings navigate contemporary spaces, examining how ontological questions of life, death, and the spectral are being reshaped in present-day Japan. By investigating these current trends in Japanese ghost culture, this work seeks to understand the evolving agency of Yūrei, their ongoing influence, and their role in contemporary Japanese society.

**Popescu-Simion, Florența**

***Those Dead Who Are Telling Us What to Do – On the Dynamics of a Vernacular Ritual Centred Around Some “Miraculous” Graves in a Romanian Cemetery***

In Bucharest, Romania, there is a cemetery where, since the middle of the XXth century, a vernacular ritual started to develop around a number of 13 graves, considered to be miraculous. People who perform the ritual believe in the alleged supernatural powers of the dead buried in those graves or even of the graves themselves, conjured to grant wishes. The ritual is well articulated and the (Catholic) administration of the cemetery acknowledge it tacitly (although not officially), placing special boxes near the “famous” tombs, where people could light candles (as part of the ritual), and taking care to clean the graves periodically. But this status quo does not go unchallenged. Several conversations I had with different women who performed the ritual revealed a hidden layer, from where new “miraculous” tombs could surface. Some of the informants confessed they dreamed of other dead people (whose tombs happened to be nearby the acknowledged miraculous graves) who encouraged them to revere their tombs too and/or revealed things to come in the future. These dreams could be analysed on one hand as a way to understand how the belief leading to the ritual first appeared, while on the other hand they seem to reveal a link between the world of the living and that of the dead which has strong roots in folklore and it is not (yet) cut from the conscience of people.

**Raahauge, Kirsten Marie**

***Invisible Worlds: Haunting Between Sensation and Representation***

How do people make sense of unexplainable experiences, many of which are invisible sensations? And how does the anthropologist deal with this field of sensations that are not represented in everyday language? These questions arise from my study on Haunted Houses in Denmark today. Based on my fieldwork on haunted houses in Denmark today, this paper deals with the gap between sensations and representations of experiences of unexplainable phenomena. Often people sense invisible phenomena, as the experiences are connected to hearing something that seems not to be there. This kind of sensation poses a series of problems to the one experiencing it. Firstly it is impossible to find out exactly what you sensed, secondly it is a challenge to find notions in your everyday vocabulary that might cover the experience, and thirdly you might find it difficult to talk to others about it. These problems are mirrored in the challenges of the anthropologist studying this field: How do you make an anthropological analysis of something that is not recognized as real, neither in the surrounding society nor by the people who have sensed it themselves? How do you represent sensations that are there not for all but only for some of the senses? These questions have become part of my work with the project Haunted Houses. The topic of sensation and representation will be given a spatial perspective, since those who are subject to invisible experiences are usually very much aware of their sensations of the surrounding physical location during and after the experience.

**Racėnaitė, Radvilė**

***The Living and the Dead During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Lithuania: The Otherworldly Signs of Disrupted Traditions***

During the Covid-19 pandemic, fear of being infected and fear of death became the main triggers controlling our social behaviour and emotional responses. The elderly, the sick and the dead of Covid-19 became fear-inducing agents. The official countermeasures and strict rules for isolating all these groups from the rest of society were based primarily on biopolitical decisions and rational solutions rather than on the human factor. However, when fear reached the level of panic, some public reactions began to be based on the concept of a mythical Other and took on folkloric forms of expression. Another significant result of these quarantine regulations was extensive restrictions imposed on funerals, which dismantled the deeply rooted nature of this rite of passage. All this confirmed that treating the sick and dying people with traditional forms of respect and following long-established funeral rituals was still very important to people. These artificially altered circumstances triggered extreme human reactions, which many scientists have rationally interpreted as a response to the changed social reality or as a post-traumatic syndrome. But for ordinary people themselves, personal experiences of otherworldly communication with the dead, became a much more important confirmation of the break with funeral traditions. In the context of the above, the paper will present an overview of such supernatural signs. It will also discuss in what forms such signs from the dead were experienced and to what extent they were related to traditional Lithuanian mythological beliefs.

**Repič, Jaka**

***Unearthing Memory: Agency of Place and Material Remains in Mass Grave Exhumations and Commemorations\****

“I can never visit the forests again.” This excerpt, drawn from an interview about a first visit to a mass grave in the Kočevje region of Slovenia, captures the profound personal and embodied impact of the spatial experience of mass graves. Since Slovenia’s independence in 1991, mass graves from the Second World War have emerged as sites of intense political debate, historical investigation, and contested memory. While hundreds of these graves have been documented—many exhumed, marked, and transformed into memorial places—scholarly work has predominantly centred on historical and archaeological studies, with limited attention to the lived, spatial, and affective experiences of relatives, local communities, and visitors.

This presentation draws on ethnographic research to explore how individuals engage with mass graves and commemorative sites. It also builds on earlier work with professionals involved in the exhumation of mass graves, the storage and reburial of human remains, and those involved in commemorative events and negotiating the politics of difficult heritage. In doing so, it interrogates how mass graves are not inert historical sites but animate landscapes—material and affective agents that mediate relationships between the living and the dead.

In a highly politicized post-socialist landscape, where exhumations intersect with national, historical and ideological narratives, the materiality of mass graves and human remains exerts powerful agency, —affecting individuals, communities, and broader societal frameworks. These places and objects provoke and mediate diverse and complex affective, emotional, moral, and political responses. Ultimately, this research foregrounds

the role human remains and materiality of mass graves as they exert agency upon the individuals and the public sphere, reshaping collective memory, moral discourse and relationships with the dead.

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**Riley, Jennifer Amy**

***“I Never Said Any of This Made Sense”: Grave Goods as Indicators of Complex Post-death Agency in the Contemporary UK Context***

Grave goods – objects put in coffins and graves alongside the dead, which the living cannot subsequently retrieve – are readily associated with ancient civilizations and archaeological intrigue. Yet their widespread importance in contemporary contexts such as the UK is little discussed and even less researched. This paper presents emerging findings from “Baggage for the Beyond” – an in-depth study of contemporary UK grave goods using mixed qualitative and quantitative methods (interviews with death professionals and people who have been bereaved; representative survey; documentary analysis). On the one hand, selecting grave goods which symbolically reflect the deceased’s unique biography and identity reinforces recent thanatological theorising concerning post-death agency, particularly: - The significance of “personalized” funerary elements in the contemporary UK context (Walter 1990; Caswell 2011) and concurrent interest in “symbolic immortality” (Lifton 1979) and “retrospective identity fulfilment” (Davies 2015); and - “Continuing bonds” and “transforming bonds” models, emphasising ongoing connections between the living and the deceased, not least insofar as grave goods evoke the deceased’s “absence-presence” (Maddrell 2013) and afford them agency. On the other hand, grave goods practices complexify post-death agency, revealing: - The constructed, contested nature of post-death selfhood (insofar as grave goods are typically selected by the bereaved); - How absent objects, as opposed to retained belongings, convey absence-presence; and - People’s ludic engagement with grave goods, transitioning between two incongruous modes (Droogers & van Harskamp 2014; Davies 2024): one whereby they richly, emotively describe grave goods’ significance; and another wherein they laugh at how ludicrous it is to leave objects the dead, who are not believed to be able to appreciate them. As such, this paper observes that grave goods reveal complex post-death agency in the contemporary UK context and, indeed, in other contexts wherein the selection of personal grave goods is a significant mourning practice.

**Simetinger, Tomaž**

***Painting as Communication with the Dead and Other Non-human Beings***

In the second half of the 19th century, communication with the dead and spirits had a significant influence on the development of certain painting styles. In spiritualist and related approaches, the artist could use different techniques to become a medium through which the dead and spirits delivered messages. This opened the door to many also contemporary practices of communicating with the dead and spirits in art. This presentation will focus on the ethnographic experiences of a contemporary painter working with dead people and other non-humans. Her testimony points to a breakaway from the original practices of this kind of painting. The painter prepares herself for the painting process with ritualized forms of opening communication channels with the dead. The trigger for the process is the need of the painter or the dead to create. The painting process itself relates to techniques of translating information and vibrations between the

human and the non-human into colour, composition and figuration. The painter and the dead are equally represented in the process of creating a work of art and, unlike spiritist and related practices, her body is not merely a medium through which the dead express themselves. Painting is a communicative and transformative process that is bidirectional and at times even goes beyond the mere creation of a new painting. By learning about the needs of the dead, the painter can, in the process of painting, intervene in the afterlives of the dead to solve their problems. The ethnographic testimony of the painter suggests that the creative process is situated in the field of perception and the translation of information between human and non-human ways of communication. In doing so, the painter uses auditory, visual and other bodily sensations, which she attempts to translate into the human language of painting.

**Sumiala, Johanna Maaria**

***Deathbots: A Media Anthropological Analysis of the Social Lives of the Dead in Synthetic Media***

In this paper I wish to reflect the trajectories, challenges and opportunities of media anthropology in the study of dead in the present context of synthetic media (Meikle 2023). First, I outline the study of the social lives of deathbots as an object of ethnographic inquiry and media anthropology (cf. Farman 2020; Kneese 2023). By deathbots I refer to those biologically deceased human beings who have gained new digital lives by digital afterlife industry generated AI technologies. In literature such beings are described as biologically dead, virtually alive, and socially active (Bassett 2022) as they continue to exist in digital platforms and interact with the living. In addition to deathbots (see e.g. Brescó de Luna & Jiménez-Alonso 2024) they can be called “digital zombies” (Bassett 2022), “digital souls” (Stokes 2021), “ghostbots” (Figueroa-Torres 2024) or “griefbots” depending on a scholarly scope and the bots’ assumed social function. Second, I reflect my study of deathbots as an ethnographic exercise (see also Farman 2020) and discuss this my work in different digital platforms as well as the significance of interviews with the (living) users who interact with the deathbots, with their service providers and, if successful in experimentation with the deathbots themselves. Taking inspiration from the work of philosopher Patrick Stokes (2021) I place special emphasis on the critical problem of social agency and individual autonomy of deathbots, as well the ethics (Lindemann 2022) and politics (Meikle 2023) associated with their study in the emerging context of media anthropology of synthetic media.

**Šlekonytė, Jūratė**

***Butterfly from the Wreath of Sorrow: A Case Study***

In the 1990s, an interesting article about a woman appeared in the local press. This woman invited journalists to her home in a village in central Lithuania to tell them about her extraordinary experiences. During the interview, she told a mystical story about the death of her mother. She said that during her mother's funeral a butterfly flew out of the funeral wreath and has been living with her for several years. She believes it is the spirit of her late mother. The story was published in the newspaper and attracted a lot of interest. People started coming from the surrounding areas to see the butterfly that had lived so long and to hear the woman's story about it. The woman became a local celebrity. The story also had a wider impact. Several other articles were published about the woman and the butterfly she cared for, reaching a wider audience. The story has a sequel that tells

the circumstances in which the butterfly ended its life. The presentation will focus on the extraordinary case of a woman who cared for a butterfly, treating it as the spirit of her mother. Her story also highlights more mystical experiences. The time of the butterfly's appearance and loss, and the woman's fateful dream are important here. The story of the butterfly is enriched with new details, the authorship of which is sometimes difficult to determine: whether it is the woman's own story or the invention of journalists. But the woman's story is not just about attracting attention and finding an audience. A closer look at the story reveals some reflections of the old world view: the existence of the soul, the connection between the living and the dead.

**Uhrin, Michal**

***Religious Holidays and Ceremonies as Points of Remembrance of the Dead in Time and Space: The Case of All Saints Days in Slovakia\****

Religious holidays and ceremonies are stable points of remembrance of the dead in time and space across the globe. Since the twentieth century in Slovakia, commemorations of the dead have most often been associated with holidays such as Easter Holidays, Christmas Period, and All Saints Days, called Dušičky (Little Souls) in Slovakia. Dušičky is a triduum of festive days, including All Saints' Eve on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, All Saints' Day on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, and All Souls' Day on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November. During these holidays, remembrances and associated practices are concentrated in public places such as churches and graveyards but also private areas, such as the homes of the mourners. The paper focuses on the analysis of commemoration practices and rituals as well as on the experiences with the dead during the triduum of religious holidays called Dušičky (Little Souls) in rural Slovakia. The aim is to explore whether and, if so, on what occasions during these holidays people report they have experiences with the dead. The text will also analyse the diverse practices associated with the cemetery, graves, and the church carried out during this holiday season. The cemetery and church act as a cultural representation of common patterns and values in society but also reflect the changes in the culture and religion, therefore, the paper will also explore the dead-scape (the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death) of the village connected with the religious holiday and analyse the dead-space (the spatiality of death involving landscape, attitudes and habitual practices) of the cemetery and church. The paper is based on long-term field research carried out between 2023 and 2025. The ethnographic field research was carried out in a village located in central Slovakia, characterized by a predominance of people who identify as Roman Catholics and Slovaks. Analysis of ethnographic data shows that the experiences with the dead often take the form of feeling the positive presence of the dead (during praying, rituals in the holiday season, reminiscent moments through the holiday season, and dreams) or ambivalent experiences with the dead in the form of dreams and spontaneous encounters.

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**Valk, Ülo**

***Personal Experience Stories of the Supernatural and the Agency of the Dead: Perspectives of Estonian Students***

Estonia is widely regarded as one of the most secular countries in the world, according to various statistics and surveys. Christianized in the late Middle Ages and strongly Lutheranized after the 17th century under Swedish rule, Estonia has long been shaped by



rational thought and, in the 20th century, state-sponsored atheism during the Soviet era. This historical and cultural backdrop has fostered a range of beliefs about the afterlife, from materialistic scientific perspectives to Christian eschatology, as well as New Spirituality concepts like reincarnation or the merging of the soul with the Absolute—echoing Hindu notions of liberation.

The paper draws on data collected from Estonian students between 2023 and 2025, based on responses to a questionnaire regarding personal supernatural experiences. The events shared by students—either directly experienced or recounted by friends and family—are interpreted by them through diverse lenses, ranging from belief in the supernatural to scepticism and epistemological uncertainty. A recurring theme in the students' interpretations is the agency of the dead, with many associating their experiences with ghostly hauntings.

This paper analyses personal experience narratives in the historical context of afterlife beliefs and the traditional legendry. It explores the spectrum of discourses surrounding the supernatural and the afterlife, as expressed by the younger generation. The vernacular theories presented by students intertwine with institutional discourses—both scientific and religious—providing insight into contemporary and future perspectives on the afterlife in Estonia.

**Varvounis, Manolis G. and Nadia Macha-Bizoumi**  
***Funeral Homes: The Urban Management of Death Rituals***

Nowadays, the introduction of social management concepts and social management practices of death is the main task of Funeral Directors and their action, through the solutions and options they offer to their clients for the funeral of their relatives. It is not uncommon for similar customary practices to be adopted by the practice of funeral directors, called the "death industry", with the aim of providing spectacle and ensuring "spectacular grandeur" in the performance of funerals. This spectacle often attracts clients, who choose an agency on the basis of the prestige of the ceremonies it organises, which they redeem symbolically by gaining symbolic social prestige. The orchestration of these ceremonies is based on the illusion of creating conditions of comfort for the dead, who certainly do not need them, in an attempt to transfer the aspirations and expectations of the living relatives to the supposed "world of the dead". On the other hand, these observations introduce the concept of a "good funeral", which is identified by the living relatives with a "satisfactory funeral", i.e. one that satisfies the feelings and expectations of the living, which they project onto the dead and seek to satisfy through the way they are managed and led to their "final resting place". The research material is based on interviews with owners of funeral homes, relatives of the deceased and priests of local parishes in western Attica.

**Warner III, Charles Oscar**  
***The Dead Murmur as the Living Maneuver: Reflections on Post-war Men, Memories, and Machinations Encountered in the Wake(s) of Yugoslavia***

This paper reflects upon different invocations of/by the dead encountered during ethnographic fieldwork in Southeast Europe (SEE) alongside combat veterans of the Yugoslav Wars. Building from both emic veteran narratives regarding/rejuvenating those fallen in battle as well as etic social enforcement of honouring/harnessing wartime dead, the reflections cross multiple dimensions of agential consideration. While not exhaustive,

the interrelated dimensions of influence centred herein reveal interplays linking living veterans, wartime dead, and broader socio-political agendas. Arguably, such machinations that work reciprocally upon men and memories in SEE and beyond derive directly from traditional tropes of masculinity or patriarchal directives of “proper” presence – both by the living and the dead. As such, this paper takes up a feminist lens in certain dynamics to (in)form a reflective space within which to interrogate consent vis-à-vis channelling the dead, masculine taboos, and violation of patriarchal norms. To project the (speculative) reflections drawn from life amongst veterans in post-war societies, both the paper and its presentation incorporate mixed-media expressions embedded into traditional texts (following with emergent techniques in anthropology regarding innovative research output). The paper aims to illustrate the (non-)consensual relationship war veterans have in responding to the voices and agency of the dead for their societies. I conclude by introducing and positioning “necroveteranality” as a concept that anchors a veteran-centric space within broader studies of death, the dead, recalling the dead, and embodying the dead.

**Wood, Felicity**

***Murder Trials and the Dead: Absence, Prescence and Agency***

Although the focus is very much on the dead during murder trials, the dead themselves are downplayed in various respects. Relegated to the category of “the deceased”, and reduced to objects for scrutiny by forensic pathologists, police photographers, detectives and the court, the dead are dehumanised. Moreover, in police photographs, various objects in the vicinity of the dead may sometimes seem more significant than the dead themselves. Also the verdict and the sentencing that takes place in the course of the trial, stemming as they do from impersonal legal deliberations, may seem detached from the dead. Furthermore, the horror of the murders may seem to overwhelm all else, including the dead individuals concerned. Under such circumstances, do the dead have any agency during and after a murder trial? Are the dead active presences in the world of the living, influencing some of their ideas, emotions, actions and responses? As these issues are explored in this paper, the speaker draws on her own experience of attending a murder trial.

**Zengin, Asli**

***Sensorial Registers of Mourning and Care Work for the Dead in Turkey***

In Sunni Muslim funerals in Turkey, the state, religious actors, and members of kin and family hold the obligations and rights to the deceased, such as washing, shrouding, burying, and praying for the dead body, which I characterize as “care for the dead.” These practices of care represent the deceased body in strictly gendered ways. For instance, the coffin design, the prayers at the mosque, the washing ritual prior to burial, and the rites of inhumation are different for women and men. Touch, in the form of washing, kissing, and caressing the deceased by family members, is central to performing the last deeds and bidding farewell to the lost one.

However, past cases demonstrate that when the deceased is a trans person, corpse washers and family members may deny touching the sex/gender transgressive body of the deceased during the washing ritual. In this presentation, I will specifically examine the role and the sexual/gendered limits of touch while preparing the deceased body for a religious afterlife according to the Sunni Muslim tradition in Turkey. I will discuss the

following questions: How do tactile intimacies with the dead help us understand alternative notions of mourning and grief? How does sensorium play into intimate economies of care work for the dead? What are the limits of gendered and sexual belonging in the practices, discourses, and affective regimes of mourning and grief? What do these mortal limits teach us about political organizing, life, and the future from queer and trans perspectives?

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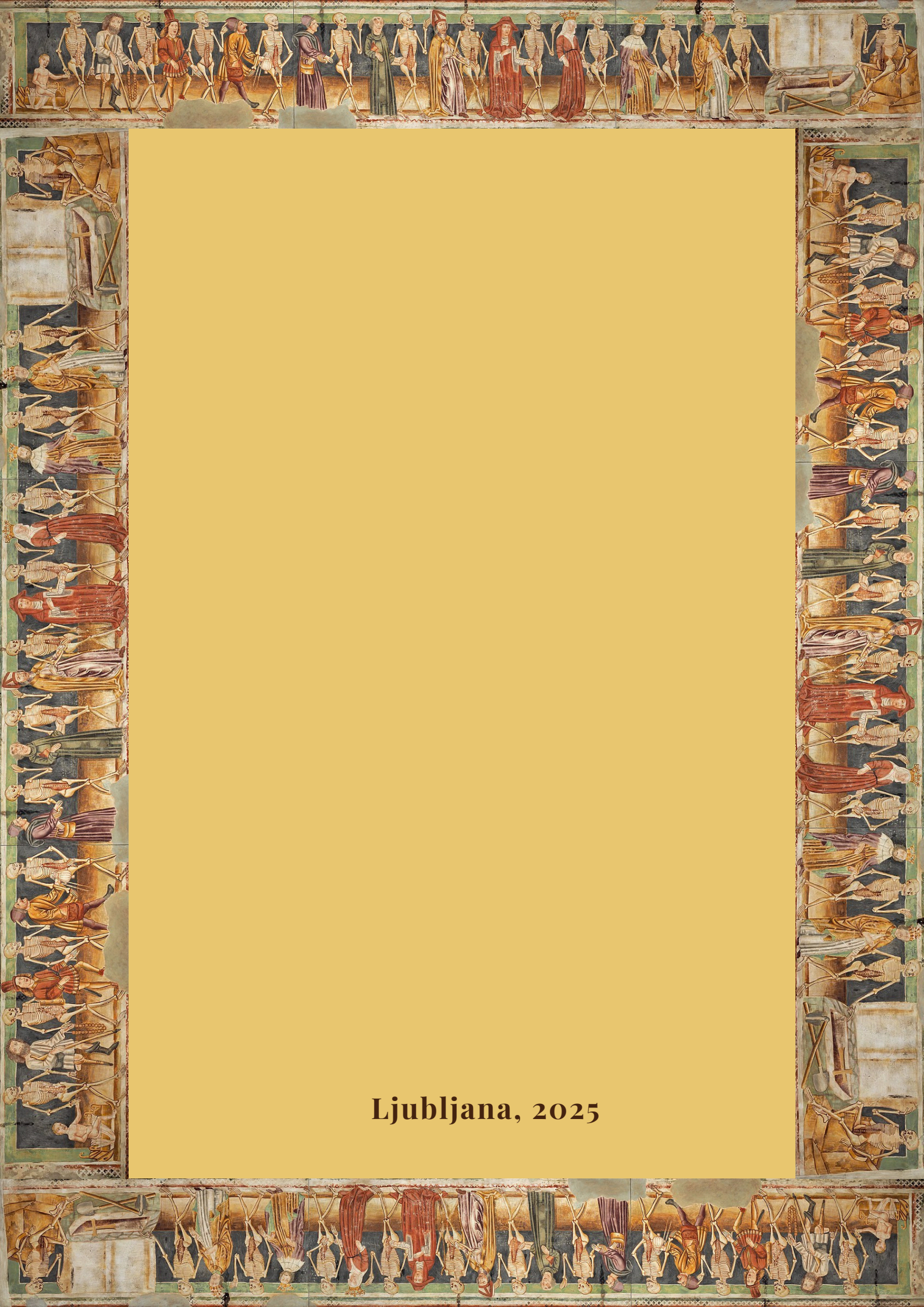
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