# The Unnaturalness of Natural Burials: Dispossessing the Dispossessed

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**The Unnaturalness of Natural Burials: Dispossessing the Dispossessed**
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**The Unnaturalness of Natural Burials: Dispossessing the Dispossessed**

The rise of natural burials has not been without controversy. Traditionalist funeralists and a number of mourners struggle to reconcile new immaterial, anti-symbolic practices with those of old. Drawing from an extensive ethnographic study of German cemeteries of both traditional and natural denomination, and by employing a spatial theory approach, we consider the impact that the rise of natural burials has had on all parties in the funeral industry. In particular, we find that those who initially profess a keenness to mark the death of a loved one according to the new conventions of natural burials frequently become disillusioned with their choice. They are unwilling to fully embrace novel mourning practices which eradicate the material symbols that memorialise the deceased. In effect, natural burials dispossess the already dispossessed.

Keywords: natural burial; cemeteries; cemetery space; mourning practices

**Introduction**

> '"To be dead here, and to lie inconspicuous in the cool forest earth must be
> sweet. Oh, that one could sense and enjoy death even in death! Perhaps one can.
> To have a small, quiet grave in the forest would be lovely. Perhaps I should hear
> the singing of the birds and the forest rustling above me. I would like that."
> Marvellous between trunks of oaks a pillar of sunbeams fell into the forest, which
> to me seemed like a delicious green grave. Soon I stepped out into the radiant
> open again, and into life.' – Robert Walser ([1917] 2013, no pagination)

In his work 'The Walk', Swiss writer Robert Walser imagines being buried in a forest.
One hundred years later, this dream can become a reality in a natural burial ground. In
this paper, we explore the rise of the natural, woodland burial ground in Germany and
find that this neo-romantic notion of being one with nature is a key driver behind their
growth. However we also find that these new natural mourning spaces are not as ideal
and idyllic as they may first seem.

The cemetery as a space for body disposal has long been a subject of interest in death studies (e.g. Davies & Rumble, 2012; Francis, Kellaher, & Neophytou, 2000, 2005; Rugg, 2000; Rugg & Holland, 2017), sociology (e.g. Miller & Rivera, 2006; Vanderstraeten, 2009; Woodthorpe, 2010a, 2010b), consumer behaviour research (e.g. Baker, Baker, & Gentry, 2016; Canning & Szmigin, 2010; Canning, Szmigin, & Vaessen, 2016) as well as human geography and landscape planning (e.g. Clayden & Dixon, 2007; Clayden, Green, Hockey, & Powell, 2015; Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010; Worpole, 2003). The traditional cemetery has been understood as a 'geography of grief' (Arffmann, 2000, p. 125), a 'cultural landscape' (Francis, 2003, p. 222), a 'repository for dead bodies' (Firth, 2005, p. xx), a 'dark resting place' (Foucault, 1986, p. 25) a 'space of emotion, commerce and community' (Woodthorpe, 2011, p. 259) , and a 'material outcome of sets of interests and influences' (Francis et al., 2000, p. 34). However this body of literature has for the most part focused on the landscaping and usage of the space without exploring how these spaces frame and condition visiting behaviours. Focusing on contemporary burial spaces and expanding the research beyond a predominant British context allows us to explore the genesis of the cemetery in a differing regulatory and cultural context.

In line with contemporary debates regarding the spatiality and materiality of death, burial and commemoration, (the theme of the *Transmortality International* conference at the University of Luxembourg in March 2017), this paper explores the link between space and mourning behaviours, i.e. how they are framed and mediated by the space of the cemetery. We explore consumer experiences of natural burial grounds and contrast them with those of more traditional cemetery spaces. The paper is organised as follows: to provide some background we begin by presenting the customs and traditions that have historically governed the use of cemetery spaces, we follow this

with an exploration of mourning practices and how they constitute cemetery space. This is followed by a consideration of the rules and regulations that operate in cemeteries to frame and delimit these mourning practices and behaviours. Finally, the natural burial ground, an alternative to the traditional, municipal cemetery, is presented as a new burial concept, which is analysed for its romantic ideals and radical realities.

**Cemetery Spaces**

Rugg (2000, citing Curl, 1999) defines the cemetery as a 'burial ground, especially a large landscaped park or ground laid out expressly for the deposition or interment of the dead, not being a churchyard attached to a place of worship' (p. 260). She also observes that it is a 'principally secular' (p. 264) institution. We follow suit in sidestepping 'religion' in this paper and instead focus exclusively on the cemetery as a public space. The cemetery serves as a burial space or 'repository for dead bodies' (Firth, 2005, p. xx). It is an essential element of a town's landscape but has a reputation of being feared and avoided (Foucault, 1986; Warning, 2009). This is a result of the advancement of atheism in the beginning of the nineteenth century, when people started to pay closer attention to the material dead body. Prior, importance was attributed to the 'immortality of the soul' (Foucault, 1986, p. 25) and its resurrection. However, in paying closer attention to the body, it became known as a vessel of illness and of death itself (ibid). Cemeteries therefore became places of fear: At night, the cemetery becomes a 'black hole', a 'no-place', to be avoided (Warning, 2009, p. 172). Consequently, cemeteries were relocated from central church gardens to the outskirts of towns. This exclusion from the city and society turned the cemetery into a city itself – a *necropolis* (Firth, 2005) – where bereaved families possess a 'dark resting place' (Foucault, 1986, p. 25). Even today, cemeteries retain negative connotations and are often seen as functional spaces for body disposal

which are visited out of obligation, compulsion, or guilt (Francis et al., 2000; Woodthorpe, 2010b).

### *The cemetery landscape*

In addition to burying dead bodies, cemeteries have been understood as offering four major functions (Arffmann, 2000): a hygienic function, a place for sorrow, contact with eternity, and marking of social status. According to German law, human remains – both as corpse and cremated remains – must be buried underground and cremains cannot be scattered. Inhumation of the body or burial of the cremains are required so they can decompose fully and hence comply with hygiene regulations. Further, cemeteries are established places of sorrow, where mourners can visit the dead, tend their graves and nurture transcendental bonds (Francis et al., 2000; Gusman & Vargas, 2011; Woodthorpe, 2010b). Arffmann (2000) asserts that 'there must be a place for the tears to fall and for [one] to say, "It is here!"' (p. 125). He observes that the bereaved need a tangible location in which to mourn and reflect, one in which they might feel the presence of the dead. Arffmann (2000) further suggests that a cemetery is a place where one can come into contact with eternity. While this might be true for most countries, where graves are allocated in perpetuity, German cemeteries require the re-use of grave plots. After a specified period of rest[1], the buried corpse is thought to be fully

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[1] According to German law, grave plots may be re-distributed after 15 to 30 years, depending on the kind of grave and local policies. The 'period of rest' is the period, in which the body may not be touched, moved, or removed as the deceased is laid 'to rest'. On average, this period is 20 years.

decomposed and the grave may be re-used for another body (Wirz & Keldenich, 2010).

Equally, a period of rest is granted to cremated remains, during which the urn may not

be moved.

Finally, as Firth (2005) observes the cemetery can be a space where families

communicate their 'wealth, social status and aesthetic taste' (p. xix). Identity work may

take place through the (re)construction of the deceased's image as well as the

construction of the family's identity through funerary rites and practices (Francis,

Kellaher, & Neophytou, 2005; Reimers, 1999). Individual mourners also reflect on their

own selfhood particularly through consideration of their relationship with the deceased.

Moreover, Woodthorpe (2011) sees the cemetery as a 'simultaneous space of

emotion, commerce and community' (p. 259). Sadness and feelings of loss are present

in the cemetery, as are emotions such as anger, frustration, and a natural urge to protect

the dead (ibid). The commercial aspects of a cemetery are twofold. On the one hand,

Woodthorpe's research suggests that the cemetery, as a business, needs to manage its

income and invest in maintenance strategies. On the other hand, the cemetery offers a

space of commerce for external service providers such as stonemasons and private

cemetery gardeners (Balonier, 2017). Lastly, Woodthorpe suggests that the cemetery

landscape has a communal atmosphere, one where mourners collectively benefit from

the careful management and curation of the space. Furthermore, for Francis et al. (2000)

a cemetery can provoke 'a shared sense of community among mourners and provide

informal support' (p. 42) in times of bereavement.

### *Mourning Practices: Engaging in Cemetery Space*

Visconti et al. (2010, referring to Sherry, 1998; Tuan, 1977) assert that '*space* traditionally refers to something anonymous whereas *place* distinctively accounts for the meaningful experience of a given site; that is, it is "consumed space"'(p. 512). In this regard, the cemetery as an entity is a public space, constituted by private practices of *placemaking* (Miller & Rivera, 2006; Wingren, 2013). Each grave plot is a *place* maintained and designed by the individual bereaved, who contributes to the overall aesthetics of the cemetery *space*. This distinction is important in the context of this paper as it acknowledges the cemetery as a space constituted through practices (Löw, 2008).

Cemeteries are said to grant 'death its own space' (Kastenbaum, 2016, p. 79) so it does not invade ours, which is why it is enclosed in order to corporally and psychologically separate it from the rest of social life (Maddrell, 2010). Yet it is still an important space for mourners who seek a continuous connection to their deceased. Gusman and Vargas (2011) observe how important it is for the bereaved to take care of and maintain their deceased's plot. Not only is it perceived as a 'social duty' (p. 218) toward the deceased, but it is also to avoid making a 'bad impression on other visitors' (p. 218). They further observe gravesite maintenance as a '"normal" activity, which makes it possible to feel that life is going on in spite of the death of the loved person, recreating, at least in part, a familiar situation' (p. 218). The bereaved try to find normality in their grief through ritual activities, which help them with their loss. Watering plants and weeding are ordinary household chores, which are performed in a similar fashion in the cemetery. 'By maintaining the grave, survivors demonstrate an on-going emotional involvement with the deceased' (Francis et al., 2000, p. 43) which is reflected to the wider mourning community.

Further, Firth (2005) asserts that the bereaved seek to honour their dead through

gravesite memorialisation but at the same time might wish to communicate the family's

affluence or social status. Similarly, Hallam, Hockey and Howarth (2005) assert 'that

personal/social identity is constructed in life through social interaction, that is, by

reference to others, [hence] it is only logical that this should continue to be the case in

death' (p. 114).

In relation to these bereavement practices, Francis et al. (2000) observed visitors

talking to their deceased and asking for guidance or their blessing. Practices of

continuing bonds such as maintaining and interacting with the plot are seen as a 'proxy

act of physical contact' (p. 43) with the deceased, and reflect an intimate relationship

which is also sought to be projected visually onto the plot. Through gravesite

decorations the bereaved not only mark the location of burial, but the grave is a tangible

focus for their grief, serving as a 'tool through which people can communicate with

others, both dead and alive' (Woodthorpe, 2010b, p. 122).

According the Meyer and Woodthorpe (2008), cemeteries are 'where the absent

is made present' (para. 1.3). The cemetery is where the dead are memorialised and

symbolically made present through marked graves. Canning and Szmigin (2010) assert

that bereaved need 'to maintain the individuality of the deceased through some kind of

personal space or memory' (p. 1132). Practices of continuing bonds acknowledge that

'dead people [are] both absent (in that they [are] no longer actively interacting in an

embodied sense with other people) and present (in the use of objects on graves, which

many people visit to 'be' with them)' (Meyer & Woodthorpe, 2008, para. 1.7).

### The Regulations of Cemetery Space

Cemeteries in Germany are highly regulated spaces. They are enclosed by walls or fences to identify them as *other* places (Foucault, 1986; Walter, 2005) or 'separate place[s] with a special purpose' (Rugg, 2000, p. 262). The German term 'Friedhof' literally translates to 'enclosed court' and has nothing to do with 'peace' (=Frieden) which is a common misconception. For comparison, the English 'cemetery', the French 'cimetière', and the Italian 'cimitero' are rooted in Greek and translate to 'sleeping place'.

Strict regulations and statutes dictate who may be interred (i.e. often only people living in the catchment area), the layout of each plot, the design and measurements of the individual headstone or grave marker, and the level of maintenance required (Wirz & Keldenich, 2010). These regulations also dictate when, how and where a body (or cremated remains) can be disposed of; namely, human remains must be buried within designated cemetery premises. Rugg (2013) criticises these regulations as the bereaved have 'little option but to comply' (p. 229). The cemetery ideal, which evolved in the 19th century, saw the space as a 'sanctuary of spirituality, decency and decorum' (Murray, 2003, p. 130) and hence was supposed to combine functionality and aesthetics. This implied a universal understanding of cemetery usage (Woodthorpe, 2011) and appropriate or legitimate behaviour (Deering, 2010; McClymont, 2016). To ensure this, cemeteries are managed and policed by the municipal authorities who ensure the safety of the visitors as well as the peace of the interred dead.

**Study Context: The Rise of Natural Burials Grounds**

Yarwood, Sidaway, Kelly, and Stillwell (2015) acknowledge Germany's progress when establishing the first form of forest cemetery in the early 20th century, but dismiss it as not articulating 'green credentials in the forms that have developed in Britain' (p. 173). However, they fail to address a burial concept, which has been in place in Germany since the early 2000s: the concept of the *natural burial ground*. In contrast to the *forest cemetery* – where individual grave plots with headstones are aligned according to the growth of the trees in a designated cemetery space (see Davies & Rumble, 2012) – natural burial grounds use trees as grave markers under which cremains are buried with no indication of the exact location of the urn. These burial grounds only allow burials for cremated remains and are located in designated woodland areas away from settlements. The urn is fully compostable, thus, the cremains and the urn are said to become 'one' with nature (Frevert, 2010). The aforementioned period of rest is extended in these burial grounds and can last up to 99 years, depending on the respective statutes.

In Germany, this form of burial was first introduced and privately operated by the FriedWald GmbH[2] (Frevert, 2010), and has since also inspired municipalities to implement their own burial areas in woodlands. Since their first opening in 2001, FriedWald has developed over 60 locations German-wide (FriedWald, 2018). With the legal requirement to bury human (c)remains, this has become an appealing alternative to cemeteries. This burial concept promotes the *natural* appeal of woodlands and seeks to inspire a bodily and transcendental return to nature (Frevert, 2010). Headstones and any other kind of gravesite marking or decoration are strictly forbidden in these spaces.

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[2] A GmbH is the German equivalent to a British PLC.

According to a study undertaken by Aeternitas (2013), 26% of participants[3] said they

would contemplate an alternative, woodland burial (compared to 19% in 2004). This

shows a slow but significant increase in the popularity of the 'natural' burial concept.

Although it was not possible to find a reliable source for exact burial figures – as these

are not collected centrally or communicated to the public – the opening of an increasing

number natural burial grounds in Germany (at least 60 locations in the past 18 years, see

FriedWald (2018)) reflects an increase in consumer demand.


**Methodology**

This paper is based on a larger ethnographic study which explores the spatial and

material elements of body disposal in German culture. The findings presented in this

paper emerge from 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in German cemeteries. The

primary focus was on two types of burial grounds and their competing rationales: the

traditional municipal cemetery and the natural burial ground. Eight burial grounds in the

South-West of Germany served as research locations. Four of these were municipal

cemeteries and four were natural burial grounds. Of these four natural burial grounds,

two are operated by municipalities and two are operated by private service providers.

The locations were visited regularly by the first author over the research period, who

kept a diary with reflections on these spaces, their overall layout and design, their

management and their usage by other visitors. In addition, 13 interviews were

conducted with death-related professionals associated with the cemeteries, including

undertakers, stonemasons, and cemetery gardeners. Discussions covered their work in

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[3] Total number of participants: 1,005

the cemetery, their experience with bereaved consumers, and their opinions about the

current competition in the market. Further, 18 bereaved individuals were interviewed

about their perceptions and usage of the cemetery and their experience of the prevailing

rules and regulations. A list of participants mentioned in this paper can be found in

Table 1. Interviews with professionals were conducted on their work premises. The

locations for interviews with non-professional informants varied and were adjusted to

their preferences (Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, & Hill, 1994). These interviews were

conducted in their own home, on a bench in a park, or in the researchers' office.

Permission for the study was granted by the university's ethics committee and the

associated guidelines were followed surrounding participant protection and anonymity.

All photographs shown in this article were taken by the first author and permission for

publication was granted by the burial ground operators.

After transcribing the interviews and observation diary, NVivo 10 was used as a

tool to analyse the data. The data was coded and categorised into themes in order to

organise them. Themes included material and spatial elements such as grave types and

designs, mementos, visiting practices and routines, experiences with the cemetery

regulations, landscape developments, and general content / discontent. Taking a

hermeneutic approach to data analysis, the focus, shaped by the authors' collective

academic expertise in consumption-related phenomena, was on the 'dynamic

relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings'

(Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 868).

*Table 1 - List of participants referenced in this paper*

| Name | Background | Case of Death discussed |
|------|-----------|------------------------|

| Ben | Non-professional participant | Grandparents, time frame of bereavement not specified, municipal cemetery, inhumation, infrequent visits, experiences the cemetery as unpleasant and constraining |
|---|---|---|
| Caroline | Non-professional participant | Grandparents, time frame of bereavement not specified, municipal cemetery, inhumation, infrequent visits, family tensions regarding grave maintenance |
| David | Non-professional participant | Grandparents, time frame of bereavement not specified, municipal cemetery, inhumation, frequent visits, maintains the grave, enjoys the atmosphere of the cemetery |
| Henry | Cemetery gardener | Brother of father-in-law, time frame of bereavement not specified, buried in natural burial ground, cremated, no visits to this specific plot, expresses his negative experience with the natural burial ground |
| Lucy | Non-professional participant | Father, three years ago, buried in natural burial ground, cremated, frequent visits, maintains and individualises the plot, experiences the traditional cemetery as constraining |
| Luke | Non-professional participant | Mother, six years ago, municipal cemetery, urn plot, cremated, frequent visits, experiences the cemetery space as structured and managed |
| Valerie | Administrator of woodland burial ground | N/A |
| Molly | Non-professional participant | Father, 10+ years ago, municipal cemetery, cremated, almost no visits, experiences the cemetery as a space with too strict regulations |

**Obligation and Constraint in the Traditional Cemetery**

When questioned about their general perceptions of municipal traditional German

cemeteries, mourners tended to focus either on their material aspects, ('crosses and

headstones', 'paths and neat lawns') or their symbolic/atmospheric elements ('reflecting

family history', 'spaces for calm'). While many responses were relatively detached

observations, for some informants the strict management and spatial regulations of

these spaces were an issue:

> 'In general, I find that the rules and regulations in the cemetery are too strict. […] They are quite strict […] when you neglect the plot, with the fines and all. [They] check whether your plot is maintained. […] So much control. […] They should really loosen up a little. For example you can't walk your bike through it. Or when I had a conversation I was told off for talking too loudly. Can you believe it?' – Molly, bereaved informant

As Molly observes, the regulations that govern these spaces delimit the sorts of behaviours permitted (i.e. no talking loudly) and also the items that may be brought into them (i.e. no bikes). They also entail an element of policing mourning practices and behaviours themselves. Fines levied for unkempt plots are unwelcomed at the financial level, but they are also discomforting as they say something about mourners commitment to their deceased relative or friend. As such the requirements of these regulations extend to govern the intimate practices and relations of mourning through 'expected' levels of commitment enacted through regular attendance and maintenance of graves.

> 'These visits sometimes have an element of constraint, I think. […] Everything is so framed. And you walk through the aisles and look left and right […] and then you stand quietly in front of the grave. I can think of nicer ways.' – Ben, bereaved informant

While rules and regulations operate to govern behaviours in cemeteries, these behaviours are also governed through the physical design and layout of the cemetery space. As Ben comments above 'everything is so framed'. He is referring to the way in which the formal layout of the graves requires certain behaviours, as he observes, 'standing quietly in front of the grave'.

It is not only the formal layout of the cemetery that seems to constrain behaviour but also its general aesthetic or atmosphere which is hard to define but is created through layout, design, structure and even the location of these spaces. Capturing this aesthetic is difficult. '[L]aid out according to a rigorous plan' (Foucault, 1986, p. 27),

cemeteries are managed and landscaped by the municipality and are separated from the

surrounding town through walls or fences. Such design succeeds in separating the space

from all other spaces. At the same time it appears that they 'have to be framed so that

people know how to act' (Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987, p. 116). Respecting the dead and

attending to grave maintenance are both behaviours folded into cemetery regulations

and management.

When mourners talked about spatial aesthetics, they referred to 'beauty', in

particular the beauty of nature as contrasting with the formal, manmade (and therefore

rather unbeautiful) aesthetic of the traditional cemetery.

> 'I think it is rather constraining. […] I don't think it looks nice, the one by two metres
> thing *[she refers to the outline of a grave plot]* where everyone puts three tulips on, I
> don't think that's nice. […] With a headstone, I don't think that is beautiful. With a tree
> and some lawn, I like that, when you are in touch with nature.' – Lucy, bereaved
> informant

> 'For what it's worth, I think a cemetery can be more natural. *[Interviewer: 'What
> do you mean with natural?']* It shouldn't be as neat and accurate, the paths are
> paved, everything is aligned. It seems rather sober and stinted. I don't think a
> cemetery needs this. I don't mind the uneven stairs or the hedges and weeds. […]
> I think it is good if it grows a little more freely.' – Luke, bereaved informant

Here, respondents find the formal and managed aesthetic of traditional cemeteries (i.e.

the formal alignment of the grave plots, the paving of paths) to be 'sober or stinted' and

'not necessarily beautiful'.

Overall, mourners seem to perceive and experience traditional cemetery spaces

as constraining. They clearly resent the existence (and policing) of cemetery rules and

regulations and in addition they seem to want to break free from the behaviours that are

prescribed and framed by the physical layout and aesthetic of traditional cemetery

space. Yet, when probed they struggled to express how they would like to behave

differently. The initial appeal then, of a radically different approach to burial space, one,
which is seemingly more natural and unstructured, seems to lie in the fact that it is an
'alternative' to the traditional, formal space of the cemetery, and thus might allow for a
more varied tapestry of behaviours.

**The Natural Burial Ground as Alternative**

The growth in popularity of natural burial grounds might in part be understood against
this backdrop of a general malaise with the formalities of traditional burial grounds. As
an administrator of a privately operated natural burial ground explains:

> 'It is not a static cemetery. It grows, you see. […] In the cemetery you can't just say, "I
> want this or that plot", they are all aligned and usually sold linearly. And then you have
> all those regulations regarding the headstones. It mustn't be higher than this, and the
> writing must be that, and the colour should be this and so on. And here it is like this:
> you choose which tree you want. You tell us your preferences, if you want an oak tree,
> or a beech tree, if you want a bent trunk or a straight trunk.' – Valerie, administrator of
> a natural burial ground

Alternative burial grounds rely on the existing layout of the forest and incorporate the
trees as grave makers without adding elements like headstones. The trees are used
symbolically as a grave marker with no maintenance obligations. In contrast to a
traditional cemetery with framed plots and static headstones, the trees continue to grow
as a reminder of the continuation of life while also connecting to the past and the memory
of the deceased. Valerie emphasises the freedom for bereaved individuals, to choose a
tree whose growth might align with the deceased's personality thus highlighting the
'potential of the memorial tree to sustain memories and the identity of the deceased'
(Clayden & Dixon, 2007, p. 258).

Further, the alternative of a natural burial type seems to meet the bereaved needs for a less rigid burial space, where they can break free of maintenance obligations, municipal regulations and spatial limitations. It comes as a relief at a time when increasing mobility and relocation for work or other personal reasons makes the regular visiting of grave sites difficult (Fenzel, 2012; Wickel, 2011). The cemetery as a space for mourning and remembrance seems to have become outdated. This is where the natural burial ground aims to draw the mourners' attention as they advertise the forest as a positive alternative to the traditional cemetery. When discussing natural burial grounds, respondents continually emphasised associations between nature (especially trees) and a much broader sense of life and living.

> 'I don't like the rigid cemetery. […] Here you have something to touch, the nature. It is different with headstones on graves. They speak demise to me. The trees speak life.' – Valerie, administrator of a natural burial ground

> '[Buried] underneath a tree would be great. […] Or even if you plant a tree and it grows. […] I mean, this way you really are becoming one with the tree.'
> – David, bereaved informant

Here the conception of life extends to perpetuity, the urge towards the continuation of life after death and immortality. Davies (2005) expresses this as 'ecological immortality', which is 'the intrinsic relationship between the human body and the world as a natural system within which the ongoingness of life is grounded in the successive life and death of [...] all things' (p. 86). Similarly, Francis et al. (2000) see a relationship 'between person and nature, where an ecologically managed woodland reconfigures the landscape' (p. 47).

**Realities of the Natural Burial Ground: Managed Nature**

Evidently a tree burial is associated with the romantic ideals of nature as liberating and

unruly (as opposed to formal and managed). However, observations suggest that these

'natural' burial spaces are as equally constructed and managed as traditional burial

grounds (see e.g. Balonier, 2017; Foucault, 1986; Rugg, 2013).

The opening sentence on the welcome board of one of the natural burial grounds

visited reads, *'[We] offer people a burial site where they already feel comfortable in*

*their lifetime: the forest'*. This wording hints at a continuation of existing experiences of

nature; this is undoubtedly in contrast to the managed, manmade environment of the

traditional cemetery. Yet, as a closer investigation of natural burial grounds reveals,

their nature is quite managed.


*Accessibility*

While a German municipal cemetery is designed for public access – often provided with

a bus stop nearby – the natural burial grounds visited in this study were located in

forests and required a long walk or a car and effort of driving on narrow forest paths to

reach them. The purposely built car park at the burial site seems to contradict the

'natural experience' as visitors drive through the forest to reach the grounds. Also, this

remote location makes visits difficult for elderly people, people with walking

difficulties, or people who do not have a car.

Upon arrival, the welcome board displays information as well as the statutes of

the burial ground. The first poster reads:

'Opening hours: Entrance to the grounds […] is permitted daily one and a half

hours after sunrise and one and a half hours before sunset.' – Article 4, statutes

Apparently, even though it is located in the middle of the forest with no clear

boundaries, there are opening hours to the burial ground. This seems surprising, as the

forest itself does not have access restrictions. Municipal cemeteries are gated to restrict

access to opening hours, but natural burial grounds are supposed to blend in with the

surrounding forest. They have neither gates nor fences. Yet, a walk through the first set

of trees showed that this is an equally marked and managed space.

The paths are highlighted with mulch, which differentiates the burial ground's

paths from the surrounding forest paths. In addition, the trees left and right of the path

are marked with coloured plastic ribbons; each colour indicating the price range for the

trees still available for burial. An additional element, which visually punctuates the

forest setting, is the presence of portable toilets. These toilets are located near the

'entrance', next to the car park. They are surrounded by a wooden fence to blend in with

the environment; yet, their blue colour and the fact that these toilets operate with

chemicals conflict with their 'natural' woodland setting. Added elements like these

indicate that these spaces are highly managed and need to cater for the visitors' needs.


[Figure 1 near here]



*Visibility*

In addition to the incongruity of 'nature' in the natural burial ground, there are other

elements, which indicate discrepancies in relation to these alternative burial spaces.

Francis et al. (2000) identify the cemetery as a space which 'sustain[s] important,

largely unacknowledged functions in personal, family and community life' (p. 34).

However, natural burial grounds are located in distant woodland areas and are hence

disconnected from society. They are almost invisible, as Valerie observes:

> 'People don't necessarily realise that they are walking through a burial ground.
> They are marked as such, yes, but there is no fence hindering anyone walking
> through the woods. It is a part of it'. – Valerie, administrator of a natural burial
> ground

As such, the dead are not only absent from the world of the living but their grave plots have also become invisible. A traditional cemetery is linked to history and ancestry, memorialising the deceased's life, giving them their space for a peaceful rest while acknowledging their former presence among the living by marking their individual plot. In contrast, natural burial grounds are integrated into existing public forests, the plots of which are not marked individually, leaving their exact location unidentified. The exact burial location is not indicated and the tree is assumed the proxy-memorial.

Lucy describes how she overcame the fact that her father's urn plot was blending in with the forest floor.

> 'I replaced the grass on the plot [and] I maintain that piece of grass, I cut it and so
> on. […] Since it looks a little different it is funny in a way.' – Lucy, bereaved
> informant

Natural burial grounds advertise that 'nature takes over the maintenance' (FriedWald, 2018) and prohibit any form of material grave marking. Yet, it seemed important for Lucy to overcome this by planting a different kind of grass to mark the burial site of her father's urn. A grave plot is a 'concrete, material symbol of the dead person' (Gusman & Vargas, 2011, p. 205), which Lucy makes an attempt to replicate. It is a visible memory of the deceased where the bereaved seek 'to keep [the deceased's] identity alive and to regenerate their relationships even after death' (Francis et al., 2005, p. 214). This seems only possible where the location of burial is visible. In a forest burial where the ground is evened out and the burial site concealed, this seems to be a problem for the bereaved visitors.

Further, these burial forests are located away from cities making regular access difficult. This was also noted by Molly when she reflected on how her family had contemplated about a burial plot for their father.

'My father loved to be outdoors and I would have preferred a tree burial where the deceased gets a tree in the forest. […] I would have preferred that but they are far away from [town anonymised] and that is why we did not choose it. My little brother was only 12 when my dad died and for him it would have been really difficult to visit. […] We didn't know if any of us would need to visit […] and that is why we chose the [town's cemetery] where we can go more easily.' – Molly, bereaved informant

Molly's family made a conscious decision in favour of an accessible and identifiable burial plot, which allows everyone to visit their father freely and in their own time.

Burial grounds in the woodlands place the grave plot in physically remote spaces which may be inaccessible for the bereaved. Further, Clayden et al. (2015) question whether 'death become[s] forgotten if quietly folded away into the landscape' (p. 1). This emerging alternative enhances a disconnection of family bonds as the natural burial ground is not as accessible as a local cemetery. Likewise, Baker et al. (2016) assert that the absence of a visible and visitable marker such as a grave plot or a headstone, can disrupt the mourning experience. Henry spoke of his father-in-law, who chose to bury his brother in a natural burial ground.

'My father-in-law regrets it now because he never visits. […] It is far and you don't have the possibility to bring flowers or anything. […] It was done for the sake of convenience and now no one is really happy about it.' – Henry, cemetery gardener

Henry's father-in-law made an irreversible decision in favour of a natural burial plot. Even though, at the time, it seemed appropriate to bury the cremains in a forest ('they wanted something different for him'), the family now regrets this decision because the

plot is not present in the family's life. It is neither easily visitable, nor a visible

memorial for their family member. Rather, it is a tree in a forest, which they never visit.

Meyer and Woodthorpe (2008) assert the importance of gravesite visibility as the

absence of the deceased can be overcome by making their burial plot present. Henry's

family failed to create such a visible and visitable memorial for their deceased and are

now faced with the sheer *absence* of the plot.

In summary, natural burial grounds are located in forests outside of cities and

remove the deceased from the town and hence from everyday social life (Rumble,

Troyer, Walter, & Woodthorpe, 2014). They are distanced from their families and no

longer *present* in the community. This also impedes visiting routines which are intended

to ensure a continuous connection with the dead (see e.g. Francis et al., 2000; Holloway,

2007; Reimers, 1999; Woodthorpe, 2010b).

### *Accommodating Material Engagement with the Deceased?*

The analysis of the appeals of a natural burial ground revealed the two major selling points

for this novel burial alternative. On the one hand, there is the otherness of the burial space,

the 'natural' and 'green' mourning environment without *memento mori* or structural

constraints. On the other hand, there is a lack of mandatory maintenance obligations,

which prevail in the traditional cemetery. However, natural burial grounds have one

specific regulation, namely the ban of any kind of gravesite marking or decoration, which

includes figurines, toys, and especially candles.

> 'We have people who still put up candles and decorations. This is not only dangerous but
> it is also against our policies and our concept of a *natural* burial ground.' – Valerie,
> administrator of a natural burial ground

With the first opening of a natural burial ground in 2001, the concept is still fairly recent in Germany. The bereaved consumers might have been intrigued by the idea of an alternative, nature-oriented burial ground; however, their embedded cultural practices of gravesite decorations and visiting routines have not yet adapted to this new environment. Francis et al. (2000) identify these practices as vital for the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved which indicates that they are not easily abandoned. The tending of the grave can be seen as a 'proxy act of physical contact' (Francis et al., 2000, p. 43) with the deceased, while gravesite decorations allow to *materially* externalise and communicate the deceased's identity and relationship with the bereaved. However, the placing of objects contradicts with the philosophy of a 'natural' burial ground as the trees are supposed to be the sole memorials. This inability to materially externalise grief seems to result in a conflict between the operator of the grounds and the bereaved families.

On visits to natural burial grounds the first author found that bereaved visitors had placed memorial objects underneath the trees, left flowers or, on one occasion, carved a name into the trunk. Among the objects found near or on trees were rocks inscribed with names, flowers, toys, and figurines.

[Figure 2 near here]

One particular act, the carving of a name into the bark of a tree, indicates a violation of the expected respect toward the forest and the trees. Caroline expressed the importance of sustainability and respect toward nature in our interview.

> 'Also the respect for the nature, when you think of it. No one would think of carving something into the trees here.' – Caroline, bereaved informant

Such violations of respect toward burial ground, but also the violation of placing

decorations, can result in an administrative fine of up to 500 Euros (according to the

statutes displayed on the welcome board).

Staff members at one of the locations collect the mementos placed by the trees

and gathering them on a bench in a clearing of the burial ground. The bench is abuzz

with figurines, personalised rocks, and toys, which visitors have placed by the trees over

the years (see bottom picture of figure 2). The quantity of these mementoes shows that

bereaved individuals seem to have an urge to materially externalise their grief, be it

through the placing of a personalised object, a message, or to mark that someone was

*there* to visit. The ban to place items in a natural environment does not seem to stop the

bereaved from practicing this kind of material memorialisation. These objects can

transform into sacred and valued memorial objects when associated with death and

remembrance. Ahmed (2004) refers to these kinds of objects as *affective* as they have

the ability to circulate emotions 'between bodies and signs' (p. 117). The location of

their placement and the nature of their giving are considered sacred in the sense that the

deceased, for whom they are brought, is valued beyond their death. As 'material objects

[they] can become extensions of the body and therefore of personhood' (Hallam &

Hockey, 2001, p. 43).

Culturally, bereaved individuals are used to materially expressing their grief

through memorial objects and seem to have difficulties refraining from this practice in

the forest. This conflict between culturally embedded- traditional gravesite practices and

natural burial ground regulations was also noted by Valerie.

> 'We have cases again and again where people put up decorations. In our grounds, the
> forester takes objects like flower arrangements and disposes of them. When there are
> figurines or similar objects, these are stored by the forester for a certain period of time.
> In case someone comes back to the plot and finds their marble angel is gone and they call
> us up and say "it cost 200 Euros". When this repeats itself or when there is a candle

> burning – which is an absolute no-go for the danger of forest fires – […] we write a letter to all the affected parties.' – Valerie, administrator of a natural burial ground

Despite the regulations, about which the bereaved are regularly reminded through newsletters or personal mail, the foresters still find items placed underneath or on the trees. The idea of 'natural' memorials in the form of a collective tree seems to contradict with the mourners' need for individual memorialisation and gift-giving at the gravesite (Woodthorpe, 2010b). Grave markers and decorations help the bereaved remember and memorialise their loved ones (Francis et al., 2005; Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012). A memorial 'offer[s] a form of immortality' (Holloway, 2007, p. 160) for the deceased but also symbolises a continuous link between the deceased and the bereaved. Artefacts are incorporated into the funeral services and later at the gravesite in order to 'remember the dead but also to foster social identities and relationships between the living and the dead' (Turley & O'Donohoe, 2012, p. 1333). Objects can tell narratives of death and loss but can also reflect the identity of the deceased and help in 'preserving the memory of the departed loved one' (p. 1333). Yet with the constraints of the natural burial ground, the bereaved are robbed of these practices and abilities to materially express their grief. While gifts to the dead have therapeutic effect, such gift giving is not possible or tolerated in natural burial grounds.

**Discussion**

This paper has demonstrated three things. Firstly, that the German municipal cemetery is an example of a delimited burial landscape which frames the behaviour of the bereaved and places constraints around their mourning experience with rules and regulations. Secondly, the rigidity and formality of the traditional space is challenged by the natural burial ground, an emerging alternative for burial and remembrance, as the

traditional cemetery seems to 'no longer serv[e] the needs of bereaved people' (Clayden & Dixon, 2007, p. 241). The plots are less visible and the deceased cannot be commemorated in the same way as the bereaved are used to in the traditional cemetery. Thirdly, our research reveals tensions between culturally embedded gravesite practices and the reality of these 'natural' burial grounds.

Upon closer analysis we find that neither the municipal cemeteries nor the so-called 'natural' burial grounds are naturally existing spaces. They are both purposefully selected areas, enclosed or marked, and managed by an administration. This adds to our understanding of the dichotomy of culture and nature. MacCormack and Strathern (1980) assert that 'culture is distinct and contrasted with nature' (p. 1) and further explain that 'culture is not nature, but nature is entirely a cultural concept' (p. 4, referring to Schneider, 1972). As the findings of this study demonstrate, this is applicable to the concept of the natural burial grounds found in Germany. These spaces are as constructed and managed as the municipal cemetery.

As a contrast to the traditional cemetery and their control and constraint, natural burial grounds are a 'trend towards an emerging partnership, founded on a more reciprocal relationship, between person and nature, where an ecologically *managed* woodland reconfigures the landscape' (Francis et al., 2000, p. 47, emphasis added). Our findings reflect a very human search for a closer relationship between nature and culture, where nature is perceived as positive and healing, as indicated in the quote by Robert Walser at the beginning of the paper. Yet, in order to achieve this there is still an element of *management* involved. '[C]onsumers imagine, manage, and experience nature through a variety of cultural discourses, practices, and technologies' (Canniford & Shankar, 2013, p. 1051). We have found that natural burial grounds are not 'natural' in their existence and operation but are highly mediated by the market and 'molded to

the commercial context' (Arnould, Price, & Otnes, 1999, p. 60). Arnould and Price

(1993) observe that consumers of natural environments expect 'a wild, clean, natural,

isolated, and "noncommercial" setting'(p. 29), but instead find 'culturally

institutionalised areas' (Canniford & Shankar, 2013, p. 1053).

Nevertheless, natural burial grounds enjoy great popularity, since '[c]onsumers

commonly frame nature as the opposite of culture in romantic consumption events that

offer sublime, magical, or primitive experiences' (Canniford & Shankar, 2013, p. 1063).

They might even enjoy the absence of memorials and welcome a burial alternative

where the bereaved are not distracted by other plots, but can experience a more intimate

connection with the forest as well as with the deceased who is buried under any one

tree.  In the end, our findings show that 'nature is not an ontological separate category'

(Canniford & Shankar, 2013, p. 1063) but is constructed in and through mourning

practices. As Szpotowicz (2015, drawing on Ortner, 1972) observes 'culture as an entity

[…] has the ability to act upon and transform nature' (p. 11).

**Conclusion**

The German cemetery is not only the designated space for body disposal but has further

been identified as 'a mirror image of our society' (Käßmann, 2008, p. 2) as it reflects

our understanding and management of death. It is a space for collectivity, public

remembrance, heritage, culture, and rituals, which gradually change as society changes.

However, since the introduction of an alternative burial form, the natural burial ground,

the traditional cemetery faces unprecedented competition. Mourners find the rules,

regulations, and formalities of the traditional cemetery constraining and counterpose the

natural burial ground against these experiences as offering an idealised alternative. Yet,

we find that these idealised alternative spaces have constraints of their own which similarly limit mourners in their expressions of grief. Traditional material and symbolic ways of memorialising the deceased are prohibited in natural burial grounds. In effect, natural burials dispossess the already dispossessed.

List of figures:

Figure 1: Coloured plastic ribbons and mulch to indicate trees and paths, portable toilet

Figure 2: Objects of memorialisation found in natural burial grounds



Figure 3: Coloured plastic ribbons and mulch to indicate trees and paths; portable toilet



Figure 4: Objects of memorialisation found in natural burial grounds

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